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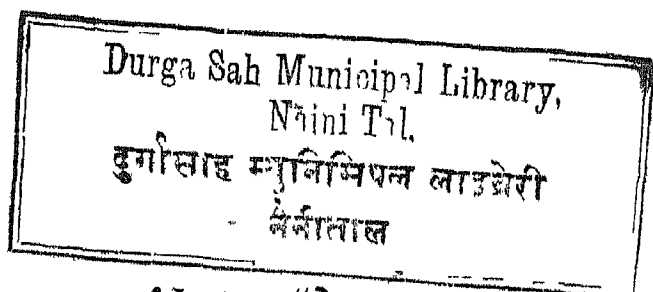
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AUTUMN FIELDS

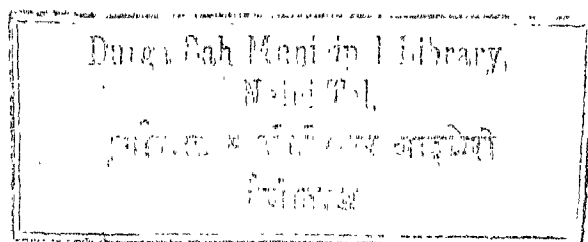
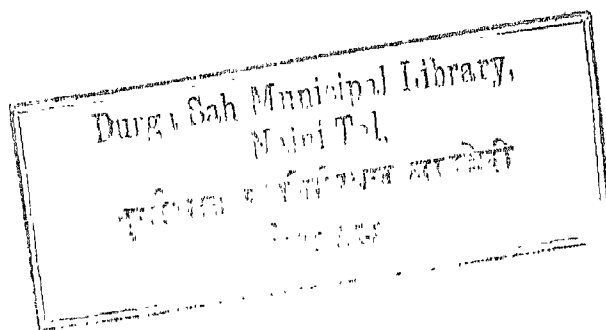
MICHAEL HOME has often been asked if the Breckland of his novels is a real or an imaginary locality. He supplies the answer in an engaging picture of a little-known region in East Anglia, with its ancient traditions, local characters, and vanishing everyday customs.

Michael Home looks back over fifty years of his own life to those who preceded him in this remote community, recalling their ways of life, their philosophy, the land they tilled and their forgotten simplicities.

An honest, unaffected book of enduring charm.



AUTUMN FIELDS



By the same Author

THE PLACE OF LITTLE BIRDS

THE HOUSE OF SHADE

CITY OF THE SOUL

THE CYPRESS ROAD

SPRING SOWING

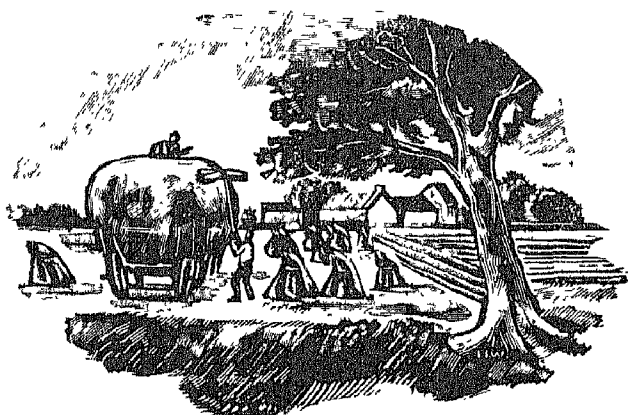
AUTUMN FIELDS

by

MICHAEL HOME

Illustrated by

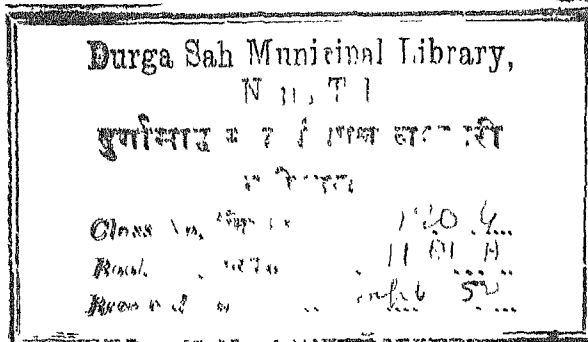
HELLMUTH WEISSENBORN



THIRD EDITION

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FOR
MY MOTHER
ON HER 81ST BIRTHDAY



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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
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TO THE READER

THIS book is in no sense an autobiography. It is the history of a small and remote community of which I was a part and of whose lives and doings I have constituted myself the narrator and interpreter.

In these days there is a natural cry for books of escape. Escape and romance are much the same thing, for romance is only some other person at some other time in some other place. But this book is no romance, and its escape is personal. For now that life and religion, work and even leisure are cumbered with perplexities, and often of our own making, it all at once seemed to me not only necessary but salutary that I should make for myself time to stand and stare: to look back some fifty years to those who preceded me—their ways of life, their perplexities, their philosophy, the land they tilled and their forgotten simplicities. But if I had not also believed that such a recalling would interest others, and that they would find much of their own to-day in another's yesterday, then this book would never have been written.

As to what may seem autobiographical, it is recorded only to give the narrator a local habitation and a name, and its chronology is necessarily erratic. But the story of the unknown community is always personal experience or well-authenticated tradition. It is no dry-as-dust, documentary survey of rural conditions, but a simple relation and discursive. Simple things demand simplicity of presentation and it is a poor country lane that has not its attractive bypaths.

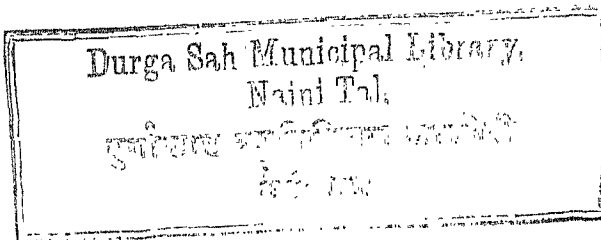
Names generally are altered and there is no unjust reference to the dead or unkindly mention of those rare few who may still be living.

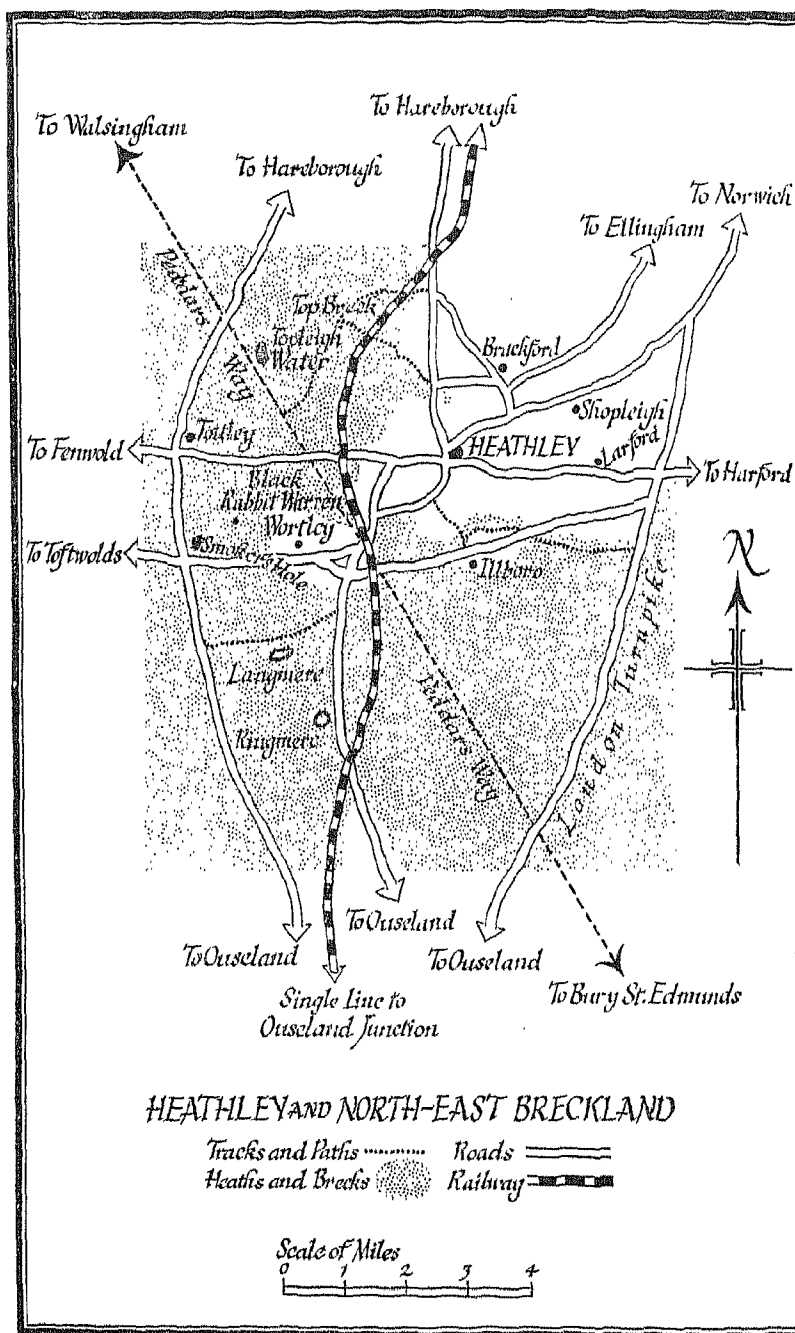
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Chapter I

HOME TO ROOST

IT is fifty years to the day since I first saw Breckland, at least with the eyes of discernment. Not that we had not lived there long enough. The Parish Register of Heathley begins well before the Armada, and on its very first page is our name, and thereafter for many years a record of our births, marriages, and deaths. But even those first names have a Puritan flavour, and when the Quakers founded a society in a neighbouring town my ancestors became strong adherents, and after that the Parish Register mentions us only occasionally. Some of us went with other Quakers to America, and there is no wonder that later still we were among the first supporters of Wesley and in the nineteenth century became Gladstonian Radicals. But had that Friends' Meeting House been near, I think we should still have been Quakers.

When I was two and a half years old I was adopted by an aunt, a stepsister of my mother. She was much older than my mother and with no child of her own, and doubtless the handing over of myself fulfilled some sort of agreement. But I could be well spared, for my brother had been born and my eldest sister, and another sister was on the way. Nevertheless, according to my mother, the house was for her a place of misery after my departure, though when I returned to it some six years later, it was to a family of six who had no knowledge of me and regarded me, and rightly, as a kind of freak.

My aunt lived in London, and the only house I faintly recall of the various ones we occupied was one that overlooked

Finsbury Park. My uncle, a tall, immensely powerful man, had been much at sea and his hobby was painting in oils. As he was self-taught and his recollections of his native Wales none too vivid, his paintings were generally grandiose in conception and horrific in execution. My mother was given some of them, and I can still see cows and pigs spotted and wooden as those from a Noah's Ark, and very blue sky and bluer water, the purple of mountains and the woolly green of trees. As he was very well off he was able to indulge his hobby, and the contacts with myself were so rare that I was thrown almost entirely into the company of my aunt. But I do remember that once in defiance of his orders I stuck a metal ring on my finger and it refused to budge. My uncle said he would have to file it off, but before beginning the operation he informed me that as soon as the ring was off he would box my ears. This he did, and I was too astounded to howl, for it was the first time in my life that I had ever been punished.

My aunt spoiled me, and the succession of nurse and other maids was doubtless due to her supporting me in my tantrums. For I was a most unpleasant child. When I expressed a wish to sail my boats, a large bath of water had to be brought to dining- or drawing-room. Each Saturday morning I was taken for a walk to a special toy-shop and a new toy would be bought for me, and if it was not the one I had chosen for myself, then I would yell lustily all the way home. Another recollection was of my mother paying one of her rare visits to town and bringing my eldest sister to see me. I took her to the bottom of the garden and pushed her, bare legs and all, into a nettle patch. I remember, too, being given a large metal box of chocolates and devouring every single one by myself.

Of my schooling I remember nothing at all, except that very faintly I seem to see a woman leaning over me and teaching me arithmetic, and she was doubtless a visiting governess. But at five I could read fluently, and I would read over and over again the few books that were considered suitable for me. These were *The Pilgrim's Progress* in an edition with coloured prints, and that I still have; a small illustrated Picture Bible as it was called, and in which my favourite view was of a wood where bears were gorging themselves on the youths who mocked at the Prophet; and lastly a folio edition

of Josephus's *History of the Jews*. This had steel engravings, and I had two favourites. One was Joshua surrounded by mailed Hebrew warriors and shaking an admonitory spear at the sun, and the other was a room in Jerusalem during the siege, and two emaciated mothers removing the lid from a cooking-pot and revealing a nicely done baby.

I was gifted with the most amazing memory, so that to read a thing twice was to have it almost permanently by heart. I claim no credit for a gift of the existence of which I was for long unaware, and I give an example only to show how freakish it was. The Bible and Bunyan I knew by heart in all my favourite parts, and when my aunt entertained ladies of her acquaintance she would have me brought downstairs for exhibition. On one such occasion I was asked the various blessings that Jacob bestowed on his sons, and I gave them so pat that I was presented with a threepenny piece. In fairness to myself I should say that I resented these cross-examinations and hated being petted and fussed over, and my only wish was to get back to my room, my book and my toys, and my own way.

The one book I wanted to read was Bunyan's *Holy War*, and because I once stole a look at it and saw its thrilling pictures. But for some reason or other it was considered unsuitable for me and was kept in a locked bookcase, in the lock of which, however, the key was always visible. So I took it when an occasion offered itself and kept it hidden in my bedroom. It was only when I had it, too, almost by heart that I panicked lest the removal should be discovered, so I thrust it as far up the bedroom chimney as my small arm would go, and there it doubtless is at this day.

Of my aunt I do not remember much. I know that she was short and dumpy and had no lap, and when she hoisted me to her knees where I was surrounded by black beads and bugles, it was only her arm that kept me from sliding to the floor. But I do remember her taking my part when I had in some way especially exasperated my uncle, but never do I recall from her a word of correction or reproof. For what jail or gallows I was heading I fear to think, but a tremendous change was at hand.

My uncle's money came from interests in the skin and leather business, but an influx of Polish Jews had heavily undercut the markets and his own firm was in a bad financial

way. I remember that we moved into a small house and some of the more elaborate furniture was sold. Then things got worse and my father advised a move to the country, where the cost of living would be infinitely less. It was to the Norfolk village of Fenwold that we went. I was just over seven then and we were there for almost a year. But financial difficulties increased and my aunt came to two decisions that were vitally to change my life. The truth was that she was as much out of place in a village as a modern evacuee, but her reasons for returning to London were that there she could keep a closer eye on things. But that return to London meant my return to Heathley, for there was now no money for the elaborate education that had been planned for me.

But before these things happened, my first real education had begun. I was sent to the local school, if as a somewhat favoured pupil, and there the Fauntleroy in me received a good many surprises. Fauntleroy is not too bad a name, for the only photograph I have seen of myself at that time shows me dressed in a velvet suit of warm brown with huge pearl buttons and a lace Vandyke collar. But at that school there was a boy who terrified me, for he was always exhibiting an open shut-knife and threatening to cut out my heart; and even if he had no exquisite reasons, I have no doubt he had reasons good enough. Then another boy gave me a bloody nose because I insisted that my uncle had more money than anyone in Fenwold. The only other thing I remember is an inspection of the school and my class being asked questions in Scripture. That became a conversation between me and the amazed Inspector, and even to-day I can't help chuckling at the stupefaction that must have been caused by my Biblical crudition.

At last, however, came a certain Sunday and my father drove over early from Heathley, which was some fifteen miles away. My small box had been packed and after tea I departed. My aunt wept as she hugged me to herself for the last time, but of the farewell with my uncle I remember nothing, for I was impatient to be gone. Then off went the cart in the cool of a perfect July evening, and I was alone with my father. I remember the awe with which I regarded him, and the strange smell of his clothes.

Fenwold is too far from actual Breckland for me to have seen its heaths and brecks, but soon we were coming to what was for me a wild and wonderful land. So much was I a

child of the town that when we first came to Fenwold I asked what were those things that grew on a tree at the end of the lawn. When I was told they were apples I did not believe it. Apples for me were things sold in shops. In Fenwold, however, I had learned to recognize the various crops and had seen a haysel and a harvest, and each was a discovery and experience of enormous moment. But the country to which we came that night was a something beyond all experience. Here was a vast region of heather and waving bracken interspersed with woods, and in the distances the faint blue of low hills more enticing than the picture of the Delectable Mountains. Soon the tall bracken was brushing the very wheels of the cart and I could reach over and pull at the sprays.

'Aren't they lovely ferns!' I said. My aunt had been partial to ferns.

'They're not ferns,' my father said, and gave his chuckling laugh. 'Brakes. That's what we call them. Brakes. And don't you pull at them with your fingers or you'll get cut.'

We went across the great heaths and began breasting the rise towards the Hareborough-Ouselund Road, and then we came to a great stretch of heather backed by brakes and woods. At our coming rabbits rose like a gigantic flock of tiny sheep, their white scuts visible to the last as they reached the bracken or made for their holes and the endless silver sand of their multitudinous burrows. I was entranced for I had had a pet rabbit at Fenwold, and then as we drew near the Peddars' Way I saw a something that made me sit up on the hard seat.

'Oh, look! A black rabbit!'

'Plenty of them all round here,' my father said, and the moment marked the beginning of an epoch, for there began my education in local topography and history. That part of the heath, my father said, was called Black Rabbit Warren. When he was a boy there was a craze for silver fur, and some enterprising firm with more optimism and money than knowledge of the rabbit acquired a square mile of heath, dug a ditch round it and raised a rampart that was fenced with small meshed wire, and then put in that huge enclosure some hundreds of silver-grey rabbits. But the fashion went quickly as fashions will, and already the rabbits had burrowed beneath the wire and had mingled with the grey rabbits of the open heaths, so that the original strain was soon lost and

the offspring were of every colour of skin and texture. A very few years and those rabbits had scattered all over that corner of Breckland.

I remember that talk as if it were only last night. When my father was in a genial or expansive mood he would talk to us children as if we were grown-ups, and his store of local knowledge was vast. When my brother went away, which was not long after, it was I who most often accompanied him on his rides and walks, and I became, queerly enough, something of a confidant. He himself had been the youngest son of a yeoman farmer and maybe he was already planning that I should receive his own inheritance of political thought and Breckland history. But I do know that he had the knack of simple and yet vivid speech and gesture, so that his small listeners would sit wide-eyed and fearing to miss a word.

But now I particularly recall the beauty of that evening; the sky all luminous and flecking the bracken tips to gold and lending a scarlet-orange to the red gnarled trunks of ancient pines. I remember the criss-cross of sun and shadow when at last we came to the Wortley Road, and how dusk was near and the chill that came of a sudden beneath the dense branches of the oaks that made that peaceful lane a natural cloister. Then my father was pointing across the meadows and saying that the buildings were West Farm, and then almost at once the horse was stopping before the door of a house. My mother was there and it was she who lifted my stiff little body to the ground. Little Lord Fauntleroy had come home.

My brother and sisters were in bed and it was not till breakfast the next morning that they saw me. The meal was at half-past seven and I know I resented being made to rise so early and when I still wanted to sleep, for with my aunt breakfast had been much nearer nine. I remember well that first meal and how I was stared at, and my accent giggled at, and how at last I burst into tears.

'Get on with your breakfast, boy, and don't be such a great gawk,' was all the sympathy I got from my father.

My mother upbraided the children and explained about differences of accent. She herself was careful of speech and hated the Breckland accent and dialect.

'They'll learn soon enough,' my father told her gruffly. 'And so'll he too.'

Never was a prophecy so soon fulfilled. That afternoon my father had business at the Top Breck which lies in the heart of our heaths north-west of Cranberry, and my brother and I were allowed to go with him in the cart. That afternoon I saw the loveliest of the heath country, and there for the rest of my life was my favourite haunt. But as we made a slow way across grassy tracks which for years had been so little used that the bracken covered them, my father had at times to set a course by guess and by God. Then when at last we came beneath the low culvert of the single-track railway and out to the breck, the horse was tied up by the already crumbling barn and we boys were left to our own devices.

My brother was friendly in an aloof kind of way. He showed me a crab-apple tree in a hedge and a field of peas on the breck edge, and he found a yellow-hammer's nest in some whins. Then from the height of land he showed me Top-leigh Watering. The sun lighted the silver streaks where waterfowl skimmed across the great mere and turned to gold and rich brown the rushes and reeds that encircled its banks. The dense woods that backed it made a green mysterious rampart, and here and there was the red of heather, the green of bracken, and the flaming yellow of canker-weed. To me that was an enchanted spot and I announced my intention of going there at once. Except to say that it was a mile away, my brother made no comment.

Then my father's voice was heard from the barn.

'Come on, you boys! Time to go home.'

My brother set off, gave a queer look back, and then was running towards the cart. I was already on my way to the Watering, and by the nearest route straight across the open breck. I had gone a couple of hundred yards perhaps, and then something happened. There was a queer swish and a sting in my leg, and when I looked round there was my father, a whip in his hand. At once I turned and was running like a deer towards the distant cart, but that inexorable whip was always behind me and its lash caught bare legs and backside and I yelled as I ran. My father said never a word till we were at the cart.

'Get in,' he told me curtly. 'Next time I give you an order, perhaps you'll do as you're told.'

My brother, only mildly interested, made room for me on the seat

'And stop that whimpering,' my father went on, and I stopped it at once.

Never was a lesson so quickly learned. From that afternoon I jumped when my father gave an order. The threat of being reported to him was sufficient to make me obey my mother. But though that family of hers was too numerous and anxious a brood for her to have had a favourite, I always think she had a special corner of her heart for me. She was London born and had never settled to the ways of Breckland, and to her maybe I was something of the city she had irretrievably lost. Perhaps, too, my return home was as if she had given birth to me again, but whether or not those things are right—and to her I have never spoken of them—I do know that she hid many of my misdeeds from my father and smoothed the way for my acceptance by the family.

Discipline was rigid and mercifully prompt. To-day it might be considered inhumane, and my mother would hide herself in some far corner of the house so as not to hear our yells. A pliant stick or the dog-whip was my father's weapon, but his hand must have fallen less heavily than we imagined for it was rarely that we could exhibit a weal. And there were no gradations of justice for we received much the same punishment for all our crimes, and whether of omission or commission; breaking bounds, it might be, or the shirking of some task, or complaints from school or neighbours. But the really queer thing was that before I had been back in the village a year, I had surpassed my brother in the ingenuity of enterprise. Breckland for me was adventure and no bounds could stay me.

Maybe health and hygiene were also a matter of by guess and by God. We knew nothing of vitamins and dietetics and yet I never remember a doctor attending one of us. Nor were we consulted about food. What was on the table we ate. If a first course was not finished, then there was no second. Meal was no time for talk. Our business at table was to eat, and while our parents talked, we listened. As for our leisure, that was rare except in holidays, and the first week of my coming home I was given set jobs on farm and garden, and that harvest I pulled a drag-rake. And there were no rewards for work except the vague promise of a some-day trip to Yarmouth. Work was an accepted thing and individual duties became inseparable from one's self.

Before the harvest was over I had become a part of the family. I obeyed orders, learned to share my possessions and windfalls, could hold my own with my brother and, above all, I had learned the folly of lying or denial. If I had done something and my father said to me, 'Did you do so-and-so?' I would promptly say, 'Yes, father.' Then I took what as promptly came to me, but I learnt, too, that the truth often paid a kind of compensatory discount, for he would often give such credit for the truth as to spare the punishment.

But though I was of the family I was also always curiously apart, for my whole background and my way of looking at things was vastly different, and it was years before their commonplaces had ceased to be for me both experience and wonder. I was always, too, more self-contained and aloof. Those years in London in the company of two elderly people had made me a lonely and a somewhat precocious child, and even in Breckland I retained interests which none could share. Books I devoured, and I was not gregarious. My idea of perfect happiness was when I had an hour or two of my own and could take my book to the heath and lie hidden in the bracken or on the needles beneath a clump of pines.

My London refinements of speech soon went and within a year I was speaking a dialect that brought pained reproofs from my mother. Even to this day I claim that were I not to shave for a week and were then to don an old suit and muffler, I could pass in a pub for a drover or dealer. I take a pride in that. No man, as I see it, is of his county or shire who has not in him the love and sense of the speech of his common folk. Let him keep his English for those who expect it, as he does a best suit, but among his neighbours and those whose roots, like his, run deep in native soil, let him speak as they do and feel a pride in the occasion.

When discipline was relaxed and we were virtuous from a spell of well-doing, home for us children was a lovely place. We were hospitable people and it was rarely on winter nights that some neighbour did not drop in. My brother and I were allowed to stay up later than the girls, and when we at last went to bed we could still hear each word from downstairs, for our room lay above the living-room. Quiet old Ben Dew came in every night when he was in charge of the woods, and Peacock was regular, and Charlie Matthews with his infectious laugh, the mere sound of which made us wriggle

in our seats with a kind of cosy happiness. As for the talk, that was nearly always on local affairs, past history or present politics, with tales of men dead long ago and remembered only in the minds of those who told of them. Perhaps it was politics that were mostly talked, for my father was a Radical who was always seeking occasions to speak his mind without fear, and for that reason died a poorer man. To be a Liberal in those days was to have a certain way of political thought; to be a Radical was to be not passive but active, and very much of a menace. Conservatives—the Tories as we contemptuously called them—were subtle enough in that creation of a Radical bogey and in tacking it occasionally to the coat-tails of Atheism. The same dexterity would later make Labour into Socialism, and the Republicans of Spain into Reds.

But whatever the talk, and long after my brother was asleep, my ears would be strained to listen. And if no neighbour came in, and my father had finished his reading of the weekly paper, then he would talk to my brother and me. From those evenings I learned local history and even geography, and got my first insight into the, for us, vital and eternal problem of what came under the rough and ready heading of Church and State. Which, being interpreted, is Parson and Squire.

Such, very briefly, was my education and upbringing, for it was things like those evening talks that educated and formed me rather than what was learned in the schools. And I would never have related them if it had not seemed essential that you should examine my bona fides and form your own idea of my qualifications for describing our corner of Breckland. I would also wish to give credit where it is due. To my father, for instance.

Though I rarely recall feeling for him the faintest glow of affection—remembrances of stern discipline were always too near for that—I was proud of his bodily strength and admired and envied his vast knowledge. Only in later years did I appreciate how varied and full that knowledge was. Given an urgent cause he could become a village Hampden, and only a fierce and ironic scorn of local time-servers and a mistrust of those professedly as progressive as himself, kept him from becoming a force in local politics. As for Breckland, he knew each hidden path and way, and in the dark he could find a track in the lonely places where few of his contemporaries

had ever ventured by daylight. He knew the history of each villager for generations back, for his father had been a man like himself.

That with all his outspokenness he was devious and even at times a disregarder of the law was undeniable, but in those days a man had to walk both warily and craftily, and where he is denied what he esteems and feels his rights, he will take them by his own means, and in spite of the laws of those whom he regards as privileged. He was a man, too, of welling and impatient energy, ingeniously inventive in mind and yet curiously attracted by the fleeting and even meretricious, so that he would often waste time over what my mother thought trifles and trivialities, and the house would be so littered with bills that she would hide herself to avoid the importunate calls of those who came, and generally vainly, to collect them.

Of my father you will hear more, but there he must be left, for it is high time we took a closer look at Breckland.





Chapter II

THE SCENE

I MUST ask the reader's patience for the space of a brief chapter, and perhaps in his own interest, for it is necessary that he should form a sound idea of the nature of strange country and learn his landmarks and have his ears somewhat attuned to its speech.

I have many times been asked if the Breckland of my novels is a real or an imaginary locality. The question has never aroused an impatience, for Norfolk, in which Breckland mainly lies, has always been a lonely and somewhat neglected corner of England, and Breckland, even to the rest of the county's inhabitants, an unknown part of it. Look at your map and you will see how the great arteries of road and rail go by it to the North, leaving it aside. To history it has furnished little spectacular beyond Nelson, except such oddments as Kett's Rebellion, Thomas Paine, Joseph Arch, Abraham Lincoln, who was of Norfolk stock, and, in later days, admirals like Wilson and Fisher. Even our ancient dialect has not brought us lucrative occupation as music-hall comedians; and the B.B.C., in its fantastic representations of the humorous side of rustic England, has not thought us worthy of inclusion in their grotesque galleys. We were for long a forgotten county and almost dead; indeed there have been times when we have been both damned and disregarded.

Norfolk, too, is a large county with varieties of scenery, and to be familiar with all of it is to know much. Some judge us by the Broads, and most by the flatness of the Fens. Some

think us a kind of Sandringham of mild undulations and endless plantations of young fir. Some may even think us a kind of extension of Yarmouth, but this I do know, that I have never met a stranger who knew Breckland. But some years before this war my heart rejoiced to see a map of it in an A.A. guide and the injunction that it should not be missed.

Breckland is real enough and there is more of it than in my early youth, for it is a growing thing, even if the growth is very much of a menace. It lies in south-west Norfolk, north-west Suffolk and mid-east Cambridgeshire, and occupies an area of some hundreds of square miles. If you make the train journey from London to Norwich via Ely you will see its beginnings at Brandon and it will be with you for twenty more miles. If you motor to Norwich via Newmarket you will pick it up there and you will see patches of it as far as to Barton Mills. If there you take the left fork for Swaffham it will be with you for miles, and if you go straight on there will be twenty miles of it, and even then you will have seen only a small part and that the least interesting.

There are three constituents of Breckland: woods, heaths, and brecks. The woods are generally oaks though there is much ancient pine and young plantations of spruce and fir. As for the difference between a breck and a heath, this is my private view and many will not agree. To me a heath is bracken covered, with wide stretches of heather. Its trees are silver birch than which there is nothing more lovely against the blue of an April sky. Here and there are depressions, rain-filled in winter and dry in summer, and then their beds are mossy and an incredible green. But a breck is arid land; dry, sandy and stony, the haunt of lapwing and curlew. There is sometimes gorse there but the prevailing hue is grey or pale blue from its lichens or the stunted bugloss. Yellow canker-weed grows in masses, and there is the claret red of Ragged Robin. And generally the land of both heath and breck is slightly undulating so that you cannot see beyond a rise, and yet all lies strangely open to air and sky. Its lonely roads, flinty and white with marl, run in the clear with no hedges, though the bracken will often brush the wheels of a cart. To the rabbit, heath and breck are one, for it swarms everywhere, and the silver of the sandy burrows harmonizes with the red of heather, the fresh green of growing bracken, and the evanescent greys of open brecks.

It is not only in summer that Breckland has that rare, wild beauty. In winter there are many who think it lovelier still. Young plantations and pine clumps are still green and the heather still red. The tracery of oaks has always a loveliness of its own and through the leafless woods at the height of a man's eyes there are vistas unseen in summer. As for the bracken there is the sepia of the already dead and the hectic red and rich yellow of the dying. On a morning of hard frost when the sun gleams from an unclouded sky, the colour is riotous beyond belief.

It is a country that is also unbelievably secluded. Some years ago a London man was staying with me and out of an argument came the challenge that I would take him for a day's walk and we should not meet half a dozen souls. The challenge was accepted, for it was clear that in the twentieth century such a thing could never happen. However, we took our food and set off one fine August morning. I took him by Cranberry to the edge of the Top Breck and so to Topleigh Watering. From there we went along the Peddars' Way—the ancient pilgrim track that leads straight as a taut line from the great abbey of Walsingham to that other great abbey at Bury St. Edmunds—and then we took a track to Smokers Hole. We crossed the main road towards the Toftwolds and then had lunch, and why we had lunch at that particular place will be told in another chapter. Next we swung round to Langmere and across the Peddars' Way again and so to Illboro Heath. Illboro village was circled and we came back to Heathley by Little Heathley Road. Never once did we use other than a hard road or a defined track and yet we saw only one living soul—a roadman cracking flints on a heap beyond Smokers Hole.

To me the beauty of Breckland is something unique and curiously intimate. But since I may be biased I will tell you of an experience.

When I was a young man and home on leave I was walking one early summer day towards my favourite Top Breck when I spied what looked at a distance like a queer and monstrous mushroom. I went to explore and found it to be a painter's umbrella and the artist at work beneath it. I didn't commit the *gaucherie* of announcing that I was a dabbler myself—a liking, by the way, that I inherited from my uncle—but I did ask permission to watch and said I would be no nuisance,

and the artist rather gruffly told me I could sit by him on the dry heath grass. But soon he fell to questioning me about Breckland and I told him much that seemed to interest for he set brush and box aside and gave himself up to talk. He told me he had travelled in many countries and that now by sheer chance had discovered the loveliest of them all. He spent a month there, I was later told, and I learned that his name was Sir Alfred East. I know that in these days of changed artistic values, and indeed perceptions, the opinion of one so famous then may now count as little, but at least it is worth far more than my own.

Among all this colourful aridity of Breckland lie many oases. There are the hamlets, fighting a losing battle against the insidious onslaughts of both rabbits and bracken. There are also scores of lonely farms and homesteads, though in the past fifty years many have been swallowed up and have vanished. That evening when I came home to Heathley from Fenwold my father waved a hand at the heaths around the Black Rabbit Warren.

'Under cultivation all that land was, and in my father's time. I remember him bringing me here when I was a little tot not as big as yourself and the stacks stood up as thick as the fingers of your hand.'

I can still see him cluster his fingers and hold them up. And the same is now true of all that land, now breck, around the Top Breck and to the east of Cranberry.

'Great fields of corn and wheat and roots there were in my father's time,' my father once told me. 'Those were the bad old days when labourers got eight shillings a week and some less. One day he was driving his old pony up here and he caught sight of a lot of things like master¹ great rabbits getting up from a field and running out of sight to yon far hedge. He was a curious man, like me, so he stirred on the old pony and drove up to see. There used to be a row of cottages there in those days but they've gone long since, but when he got there, what do you think them rabbits were? Children, all in rags and tatters and some with no boots nor nothing. They were so starved and hungry they used to swarm out on the fields and fill their bellies with turnips, and when they saw him coming they thought he was the squire.'

All that barren, lovely land has grown then not because of

¹ Trimmer John

that slick economic device, the vicious circle, but from an accumulation of events. Agricultural depressions and often the greed and avarice of landlords starved out the labourer and scattered his children. Cultivation became hurried and skimped and the poorer fields were abandoned. Where land was low-lying, labour and money were stinted on ditching and hedging and then ironically enough the swamps and marshes were preserved as making fine sport for a duck-shooting landlord. The Game Laws forbade entry to woods to keep down the rabbits in their best strongholds, and as heath farms were generally encircled by woods, the rabbit was virtually encouraged to devour. And where the rabbit gets a hold, the bracken follows.

When I was a tiny boy I drove with my father to a certain farm where he was proposing to buy a horse, and there I saw something I shall never forget. There was a field of barley, ten acres maybe, and all round that field was a strip or band of nothing, for the rabbits had devoured every green thing. Next came a band where the ears had gone but the stalks were left to about a foot high. Then came a band where there were a few ears and lastly a kind of central island where about half an acre was worth the mowing. Before harvest, the farmer remarked philosophically, the rabbits would have that too. He scraped a living by horse-breeding, buying up lame and greasy-footed mares for a song and using a good sire.

Then there was Cranberry, which Rewell farmed in my young days. Even my boy's mind could not fathom one problem in the economics of Cranberry.

'But if the rabbits eat all his corn, father, how does he live?' was what I wanted to know.

'Well, the rent's practically nothing,' my father told me guardedly. 'They'd never let a place like that at all if the rent was anything. Then it'd get all grown over and spoil the shooting.'

He went on to explain that the arable fields, high and dry, were fine partridge land; and pheasants, reared round the keeper's cottage, haunted the autumn stubbles.

'Yes, but what does he live on?' I still wanted to know.

My father gave that sideways nod of his, which was something of a wink.

'Plenty of pheasants, aren't there, son? Well, the Squire don't get all of 'em.'

Rewell was lucky. He did contrive to make some sort of a living for a good few years, and by working from dawn to dusk and later on seven days a week, even if much of his daily bread was earned by night. Others were less fortunate, adaptable, or daring. Scattered about the great heaths are ruins that once were buildings and the homes of labourers, but they are hard to find or even to discern when almost found. The bracken covers them, and canker-weed, and the endless burrows of rabbits have made what were once their gardens an indistinguishable part of the open heath.

Heathley, the subject of this book, was the most important of the Breckland villages of the south-west of the county, and its situation is somewhat unique, for it stands with its shoulders humped, as it were, into and against the oncoming bracken, but its front door looks on the open east. But I am here speaking of fifty years ago. Then the fields east of the railway were free from the more settled bracken, and great stacks of corn stood in autumn at the end of the Puddledock track. Twenty years ago those fields were virtually out of cultivation, and now the Forestry Commission has taken them over and hundreds of acres more.

According to Blomefield's rare history of the county, Little Heathley was once a suburb hamlet with its own church, but now it consists only of a superior kind of dwelling-house used as a subsidiary Hall, and a farm and one or two cottages. In Tudor times the population of the whole village was in the neighbourhood of a thousand; in my grandfather's time it was still a flourishing place with two annual markets and various fairs, and a population of about seven hundred. Fifty years ago the population was about five hundred, and to-day it is probably less than three.

It is fifty years ago and with the aid of the map I would like you to make a quick tour of the village, so that when people and places are later met they will be less strange. The first thing that strikes one is that woods are everywhere along its lanes, so that it is a green village and a shady one. Its cottages and farms—thatched, or roofed with slate or wide tiles—are generally of clay-lump, though a few are of flint. Perhaps you do not know what clay-lump is.

Only some twenty years ago I made many hundred and in the approved fashion, for my foreman had made thousands

in his youth. First a pit—by which we mean a pond or pool—is cleaned out and its clay-bed spread. Into it is put coarse sedge and then the whole wet mass is kneaded by the feet of a horse walking round and round on a lead tethered to a central pole. Then the mixture is put into wooden moulds which are about twenty inches by twelve by nine. When the sun has partly set the lumps they are shaken out and stacked to dry further, and then are ready for building. The same mixture that made the lumps serves as mortar, and the process as you will have gathered, is the making of bricks with straw which was the task of Israel in Egypt.

The size and weight of the lumps makes for hard work in rearing but building can be done with incredible speed. A clay-lump house, too, is warm in winter and cool in summer, or so it is said. But most of the labour comes when the walls are erected, for they are then covered with plaster and finally coloured with a rather ugly pink wash. It is always the plaster that contrives to crack and break away, and then if there is the least neglect the weather makes an entry and the clay-lumps disintegrate. But I found that a far better way was to build and finish off with care, and then tar the wall twice. When the second coat is still wet it can be faced with thrown grit or gritty silver sand, which is less unsightly and infinitely more serviceable.

Those then are the kind of cottages and farms and buildings you will see on this tour of fifty years ago. In the centre of the village is a huge hour-glass, lying on its side and heading north-east. The lower half is the school and the upper the village green, known as the Mound. The Mound is the hub of village life even if its name is misleading, for it rises no more than four foot from the roads that encircle it. Its centre is worn bare, with grass round its edges only, for since there is no playground it is there that the schoolchildren must play. In shape it is roughly oval and about sixty yards by fifty. Round its edges are great trees through which can be seen cottages to the east and the sprawling buildings of the *Lion* to the north.

From the Mound there is a choice of every way and we head north along Hareborough Road. A short way on past William Cash's shop is a fork and that to the left is Vicarage Road. Houses are everywhere along it and on the right is the Georgian vicarage, well back from the road and

approached by a short drive. To the left is a path that runs by Josh Till's cottage across Stile Meadow to Wortley Road and so by a private road to Hall and church. Farther on to the left is West Farm with its vast barn and buildings. A few years ago the mill was still there and in my grandfather's time he could look from his window in early morning and count seventy men and boys on their way to work. Now—which is as always fifty years ago—there are perhaps ten.

Passing the fields before Puddledock we come to another fork. To the right a grassy track, known as the Drove, leads to the Plains with their rough grazing for sheep, their shallow pools, stretches of gorse and then their bracken and heaths. Past the buildings and cottages known as Puddledock the main road becomes a track and then peters out altogether in the middle of the sparsely cultivated brecks.

We go back to William Cash's tailor's shop and head north again along the Hareborough Road. The last cottage is that of John Balfour, the schoolmaster, and then comes the chapel. Then there is nothing but fields till we come to the keeper's cottage opposite the Common. The Common is a good many acres, and its grazing is let. Old women go there and cut dead furze and wheel it home in barrows or home-made carts, and in winter we skate and slide on its many ponds. So to the Brackford brook and on the right the one lane in all Breckland that should never be missed.

The mile or so of its length is along a little valley. To each side of it the tiny cultivated fields and meadows slope down, and close along it runs the shallow brook with its many low bridges that lead to its few cottages and farms. So rare is the traffic that it is more track than road, and in summer its air is heavy with meadowsweet and honeysuckle. In its hedges are many fruit trees and in autumn the bullaces hang like grapes above the brook. Kingfishers flash blue by the willows and the voles sit careless by the mud of their holes.

Even as a boy that lane and brook and valley would remind me of that pleasant secluded valley of which Great-heart spoke to Mercy; how that the King had his country seat there and loved to walk in its gardens and meadows and orchards and to find the air pleasant. But that first little farm there has also an unusual and tragic memory. Aaron Rewell, brother of the Cranberry farmer, offered us bullaces and one November afternoon a sister and I went to gather them. We were very

near the house and all at once we heard the sound of a crash. Cautiously we went to explore, and then were running terrified for help. For Aaron had fallen from the landing and he lay at the foot of the rickety stairs with a broken neck.

At the end of the lane is a T-head. To the left is Brackford village, and one very large farm. A few years from now that farmhouse will become one of the finest Tudor houses in England, and one day Winston Churchill will sit by its moat and paint the gardens and the house. The story of that house has some bearing on this book, so I move on for a few years and you can sit on the bank and listen.

A certain Colonel Pewtrance bought that farm because he saw its potentialities. Specialists came down for survey and consultation and finally at a cost of many thousands of pounds the great house was lovingly and faithfully restored. But Pewtrance's ambitions did not end there. He had acquired the whole estate and he wished to make its far bounds defined and hem in his rabbits and game. His scheme was to fence in, and particularly along the Peddars' Way, the whole of Brackford Heath with oak posts and split oak pales. The project was to be self-supporting to the extent that his own trees were to be felled and cut up at a special saw-mill made on the site. The cost was very great. The Yarmouth man who rived the paling was paid the then colossal sum of two pounds a week, and he and other men were working there for months.

Then Pewtrance went bankrupt, and thereby will hang a good story. As for his fence, the rabbits at once began burrowing beneath its posts, and they sagged and fell, and whole stretches of paling with them. For years afterwards the neighbouring hamlets plundered it for timber as the Arabs of North Africa plundered the monuments of Rome. Once, before leaving for the South of France, I gave an order for a double sty to be built in my orchard. When I returned many weeks later the sty was built and sows were in it. I paid the bill and only later did some of the timber look strangely familiar. But I asked no questions.

We have spent a long time in Brackford Lane but it is Heathley's favourite walk on a Sunday, and the right turn from where we are will bring us back to Heathley by the Shopleigh Road. As we enter the village we see a narrow track on the right, and that leads to the cottages known as

Parliament. The name goes back only to my grandfather's days, for on Sunday mornings he would take the weekly paper there and read it aloud to all who cared to assemble. Even now in the nineties there are many who can neither read nor write, and the preachers at the chapel will read out a hymn verse by verse for the sake of those to whom a book would be useless.

From the school, which even if surrounded by posts and a double iron rail, is considered badly sited and a fast horse and trap a danger to children, there is again a choice of ways. The Wortley Road is the most frequented for it leads to the railway station. That at Harford, on the main line, is four miles away and only a fast trotting nag can do it in twenty minutes, but Wortley Station is only two miles, and good going.

The road, as you may recall from my first sight of it, is arched by trees like the roof of a cathedral, and there are woods and parkland on its left for the first mile of its length. Just past the school a side road to the left runs to church and Hall, and farther on is the private road. Then until Wortley Station there is never a house. But if at the mile fork we had gone straight on towards Cranberry, the road would have been rough and petered out to a sandy track. And its hedges would have disappeared by the time we came to the drift that leads to a keeper's cottage and the cleared space where pheasants are reared.

Back at the school we turn left for the Harford Road. First is the great wood-yard with its estate office and the house of George Spline the foreman. Here we turn right and move along Little Heathley Lane. To its right is the great stretch of the Park, where the Flower Show is held and cricket played, and in the far distance can be seen the stone-coloured Georgian Hall. By the Devil's Pit-hole, which is a grassy hollow, a stile is at a path to the Hall and opposite it to the left is a track to Hill Farm. Farther on, and surrounded by woods, are Lammas Meadows which we farm. Then there is nothing but Park and woods and fields till we come to the remnants of what was once the hamlet of Little Heathley. A private road leads west to Wortley Station and to the south is the Illboro track. There is another track, known to only a few, and of that we shall hear more later.

Back again at the school we go due east along Harford

Road. After several cottages we come to Moat Farm, and opposite in the meadows is still the wide ditch that was once a moat and the woods and undergrowth cover the site of what was once a great house. As a small boy I made a discovery among that undergrowth: nut-bushes that were the descendants of a cob plantation and nuts that were still twice the size of a hedge nut. Much farther along is a side road leading to Hill Farm which Wyatt was to make so notable, and after that there is nothing again but fields and woods till the Shopleigh boundary.

So much for roads and lanes. In the village centre are the four shops. Robert Addis's faces the school with its back to the east. Just before William Cash's cottage is another general store. The post office is in the hour-glass angle and there is a tiny shop and bakery short of John Balfour's cottage. There is a shoe-maker opposite the vicarage but there is no butcher. Pork is our staple diet, and we call the rest butcher's meat, and it is too dear to be bought except on rare high days and holidays. The nearest butcher is six miles away but in a year or two's time a man named Tash will open a shop, to last only a couple of years. In that time his living will be chiefly made by dealing in poached rabbits and game, and I shall be one of the providers. There are four inns, which we always call pubs, and one, little more than beer-house, will soon be closed down. The largest and most pretentious is the *Lion*.

Such then is Heathley, self-contained—there is not even a carrier—and still fairly self-important. Our living is by the land and those that do not actually work on it, feed us, clothe us, or come in from Hareborough or Ouseland or Harford to bring us into the world or doctor us. Most of our bread is home-made, and our eggs, milk, and butter are from the farms. Rabbits help out with pork, and we should be ashamed to buy a vegetable or sell one, and however cramped the space between our cottages and the road, we contrive somehow to find room for flowers. The old moss-rose is a favourite, and there are some fine bushes in the neglected garden of the ruined thatched cottage that faces William Cash.

In our way we like a touch of beauty and though we may miss such niceties as the far blue of a vista, we look up at a fine sunset, if only to forecast the weather. And we have old names for old things. Dante Gabriel Rossetti invented five names for the handmaidens of the Lady Mary and then called

their sounds five symphonies. Our names have no pseudo-medieval lushness but are music for all that. Cranberry and Puddledock you know. One wood we passed was Big Copses and another Little Foxes, and there is Pinnacle Hill and Scotgate and Bambridge.

But the things you have scarcely noticed are those that matter most—the cottages that hug the lanes and roads. In them live those who make a village even if they have little hand in its shaping, and it is their votes that determine elections. They are of all sorts for this is no idealized village. There are god-fearing men and rascals; sober and drunk; legitimate and illegitimate; hardworking and shiftless; the comfortably off and the incredibly poor. Women of all sorts too: the kindly-spoken and the scandalmongers; the house-proud and the slatterns; a reputed witch and the village prostitute. Among them are those who will always linger on the palate of my mind.

It seems necessary to mention our way of speech, for where it will be opportune to quote a man, and that will be often, it will be as well to quote him literally.

Norfolk speech is blurting and abrupt, unlike that of Suffolk which is a sing-song. The final 'g' with participial force is rarely pronounced, and words like *runnin* will be so printed. Also a Norfolk man is not fond of a final 's' to mark a third person singular and present. He says, 'Here come George,' and not, 'Here comes.'

There are other oddities. A man is often addressed by a friend or neighbour as *bor*. Borrow alludes to the Norfolk *baws*, and he lived long at Dereham. You may also remember Dickens's attempts at the dialect in *David Copperfield*. When a man says, 'Mornin, George bor,' the *bor* has the force of *old friend*. *Mor*—diminutive of *manther*—has largely gone out though it was fairly common fifty years ago.

Two or three people are collectively addressed as *together*. A man meets a neighbour and his wife, or even several friends, and he says, 'Where are you off to, together?'

Once I was walking through the village with a mightily superior young lady from town and we met a village friend of mine. The previous night had seen a violent thunderstorm—*tempest*, as we call it—and I hoped its rain had done good to old Dick's garden.

'Master¹ tempest, weren't it,' he said. 'And didn't it hully² rain! Couldn't sleep for't.' Then with a glance at my companion: 'How'd you sleep together?'

The lady's face flared crimson and even the later explanation was a tricky business.

A word too about pronunciation. Words with the sound of *urd* are pronounced *ad*. A bird is a *bad* and heard, *bad*. You may test that knowledge on a true story of a certain farmer's wife, who made considerable pretence of refinement, and was highly unpopular in consequence. The farmer had lent a roller to flatten the cricket pitch and the Reverend called to thank him but found him out.

'Thank your husband, will you?' he said to the wife. 'And tell him it did the job splendidly.'

'Yes, sir, I'll tell him,' she said. And then with an unhappy attempt to gild the lily: 'I hear they made a good job of it. They tell me it's flat as a cow's-tad.'

For the rest of our speech there are few difficulties. An American to whom I told a story in broad Norfolk insisted that he had understood every word, for the speech differed little from that of farming communities of English stock. I tried him with the shibboleth that every Norfolk man knows.

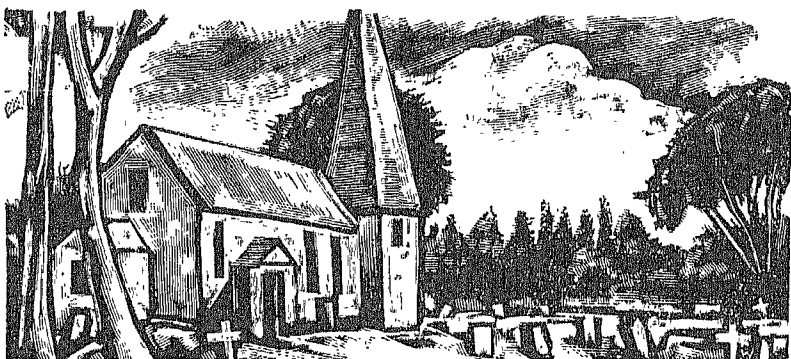
'D'yar father keep a dickey, bor?'

That had him at a loss but the test was hardly fair. All it asks, however, is if your father keeps a donkey. I should have puzzled him in earnest if I had asked if he had sin a mawther with a dwile moppin a swidge. That's a girl with a house-flannel mopping up a puddle.

¹ Tremendous.

² Wholly. Pronounced to rhyme with *fully*.





Chapter III

CHURCH AND STATE

I SHALL not be thought subservient if I begin this history of my early contemporaries with those who were my betters. For betters in many ways they undoubtedly were. No sooner did I come home to Heathley than I was carefully instructed by my mother to raise my cap to both squire and parson. I found nothing irksome in the small courtesies and I invariably found it returned. And I liked both parson and squire for reasons of my own. Never did it occur to me that the fulminations of my father and his underground circle should have in their endless references to Church and State any inclusion of Squire Finch or the Reverend John Pardon.

What did the expression 'Church and State' mean to me as a small boy? This, I think: that it was the policy of land-owners—squires, as we called them—to keep the agricultural labourer in a state of subservience, and principally for the purpose of cheap labour. The methods employed were division of his ranks and an immediate crushing of any attempts to dissipate ignorance, or the claims to free expression of opinion. It was the combination of squires, I was taught, that had defeated the attempt of Joseph Arch to form the first Labourers' Union. Toryism, as I understood it, was merely the same thing under an election name, and the Established Church was the active ally of Squirearchy.

So much for generalities. Under the heading of grievances and injustices might be put the working of the Game Laws, the magistracy as the peculiar perquisite of parson and squire,

the fact that the Church should be State established whereas the Chapel was self-supporting, the burden of tithes and the innumerable bad conditions of both service and housing under which the labourer was forced to live. And since all these things were argued passionately and men risked much for them, it has taken me a considerable time to work out why I, in my small mind as fiercely angered by accounts of injustice and as eager to do something about it, should never have dreamt of considering our own village as under the heel of a tyranny and our Heathley neighbours the slaves of a vicious system. Such tyrannies might happen in nearby parishes but somehow it never occurred to me that they were happening in ours.

Take Wortley, for example, and a happening that was often quoted. A labourer was standing one evening by the Park gate near the school and his headgear was one of those twin-peaked sporting caps which keepers always wore. The parson went by and the man gave him a good-evening. The parson went on and then came back.

'I noticed you didn't touch your cap to me,' he said.

The man gave him a look, and then, I imagine, smiled dryly, as he pulled off his cap and showed it.

'You see this here hat, sir? It used to have two peaks once. I've pulled one on'em off salutin you and the squire and I'm damned if I'm a-goin to pull the t'other one off for nobody!'

The parson reported to the right quarter and the man was sacked straightaway. That meant eviction from his cottage, but good friends were aware of his predicament and he was found work in a village some miles away.

But Wortley was Wortley and Heathley was Heathley. And then within a year or two of my coming home, something did happen which changed everything. That my father might suffer for his Radicalism had never occurred to me, and when it happened it came as very much of a shock. But let me make one thing clear. I still had my affection for the Reverend and my awe of and respect for Squire Finch. It was neither of those who brought home to me the fact that politics were not merely words. It was a newcomer to the village, and for years we were to be that rare anomaly, a village with two squires.

Squire Finch, who owned practically all Heathley, had no

great capital behind him. Rents were necessarily reasonable for the bulk of our land was poor, and as he was a considerate man and in touch with those who lived under him, he kept cottages and buildings in good repair. His income therefore from the village itself was very little, and I doubt if at times it paid its way. What he did then was to let the Hall and the shooting, and with the Hall went Hill Farm. He himself went to live at Little Heathley, and for the farm there he had a steward. The rest of the farms and holdings were let to tenants, though the shooting rights were owned by the Hall.

I might quote rent day as an example of the relations between Squire Finch and his tenants, small and large. On Michaelmas morning old Dick Shaw, his coachman, in livery and top hat with cockade, would drive the Squire down to the office at the wood-yard, and there the tenants would assemble. When the clerk called his name a tenant would walk in. The Squire would shake hands and then ask after his property, and with the head steward for witness. If the man had grievances there might be promises of remedies, or the fallacies in the man's arguments might be gently pointed out. If the Squire himself had complaints, then the man was bluntly told them, for Finch walked regularly about the village and there was little that he missed. Then the tenant would be confirmed in his tenancy, the clerk would read out the amount due, and the tenant would haul his hessian bag from his trouser pocket and the rent would be duly paid. Then a glass of sherry would be poured and the tenant would help himself to a slice of the huge plum cake that stood on the side-table and a shilling or a half-crown would be given back for luck. That last I remember most, for it was always my mother's perquisite.

That had been the ritual of years and it was a bad day for the village when Finch at last had to employ an agent, and a worse when both Hill Farm and West Farm came under that agent's control. But that is another story and it might be better to get back to Squire Finch.

I remember him as a biggish man with a tanned face. His beard was reddish brown and straggly and it failed to conceal the hare-lip that made him talk with a slight lisp and gave his voice the nasal quality which the village found easy to mimic. His dress was always a brown Norfolk jacket with

breeches to match and high spats, and he usually wore a twin-peaked cap. So regular were his walks through the village that men knew when to expect him and activities could be regulated accordingly. 'Here come the Squire!' was a warning that I often heard.

I have said that even to a small urchin like myself he was punctiliously polite, but one special instance remains in my memory. I was at Wortley Station one July morning on my way to Ouseland to school when Shaw drove up with the Squire who was going to London and thence to Norway where he spent a month or so each year. The local train drew in and the stationmaster opened for him the door of a first-class compartment. But the Squire lingered at the door and then beckoned to me, and for the six-mile journey I had the indescribable luxury of a first-class seat. He asked me about myself and my small ambitions, and never once did he attempt to question me about my father or village matters. We talked long about Scott, whose *Fortunes of Nigel* I happened to have in my satchel, and at last when the train reached Ouseland he told me to read all I could, whatever it was, and then sort grain from chaff for myself. Then he gave me a shilling! All that was the mark of a kindly, understanding man, and no wonder it was never in my mind to think of him as a member of that tyrannic Tory clique whose removal was the ultimate objective of our village revolutionaries.

Finch was a widower with a son and a daughter. Of the son we saw little, though he was alluded to as Master Charles, for he was away at school. In those days it was only the sons of squires and parsons who went from us to Public Schools, for the sons of even the wealthiest farmers went to the school in their village and then only rarely to a Grammar School in a nearby town. But young Charles Finch had a fine opinion of himself and one day it received a rude shock.

He was home on holiday and riding about the countryside on his pony. Happening to be at Bullen's Farm which lies along a drift from the Harford road towards the Shopleigh boundary, he tried a short cut by galloping his pony across a field of corn. Bullen saw him and came running furiously to head him off.

'What the hell do you think you're doin?' And when the pony stopped: 'What are you doin on my land? Who are ye?'

'You ought to know who I am,' young Finch told him. 'I'm your future squire.'

'Future squire be damned,' hollered Bullen. 'Get you off that hoss and off my land or I'll put a charge o' shot into yel'

I doubt if young Finch reported that to his father. If he did, I imagine he was told a few home truths, but in any case Bullen never heard another word on the matter.

The daughter, Miss Flora, was much older, and to my father she was worse than a red rag to a bull. In her little governess cart she would drive about the village, and, according to my father, with her nose in everyone's business but her own. To me she was an inaccessible, petulant sort of person, and the necessarily subservient village, which in its heart of hearts had no use for her, would see the approach of her cart and say, 'Here come Flo!' That she was a busybody and a tale-bearer was undeniable, and the village resented the fact that even at meal-times she would walk unceremoniously into a cottage.

The Hall was in the occupation of a man named Green, a wealthy member of a firm of international bankers, and the village called him Squire Green, with Finch being known simply as 'The Squire'. At the Hall local girls were employed as maids and young men became keepers and gardeners. A great deal of money came into the village, but other things came too—flunkeydom, cliques and cheap social strata, the itch for easy money, graft and favouritism, and even betting, for Green was a racing man.

He was shortish and plump with a face of the most extraordinary pink, and eyes set with good living. His voice was stuttery and rather shrill, and if ever a fish was out of water it was Green in Breckland. Under him the village was virtually in the hands of a hierarchy whose chief members were the head steward, the head keeper, the housekeeper, and the landlord of the *Lion*, which was flunkeydom's main resort in its leisure.

As an instance of Green's utter ignorance of Breckland ways was the dinner he gave for the village on his marriage. His wife, I believe, was French. Now a dinner to us was a midday meal in the school or our great barn, with plenty of potatoes and butcher's meats, and then a good plum duff to follow. But Green had other ideas. The meal was at tables set out on the Hall lawns on a summer evening, and it was

provided and serviced by a Norwich firm of caterers with waiters in full regalia. Every living soul in the village was expected to be there, and the menu, composed of at least six courses with a choice of cold meats, galantines, pies, and various sweets, began with salmon and cucumber, and not the only salmon we knew but middle cut of Scotch salmon at that. To drink were beer, minerals, and endless champagne.

That meal became a riot. Heathley was not used to courses that went beyond two. A suave waiter set a plate of salmon and cucumber before one farmer who promptly asked what it was, and then reckoned he'd have some of that there pie instead. Others, who liked the salmon, would come back to it at the end of the meal, or flit from trifle to galantine and back to trifle again, and altogether that menu became a gastronomic fairyland in which we browsed. The gluttons gorged and guzzled and even the children had their sips of champagne. Dusk was in the sky by the time the meal was at last over and the Reverend appeared to call for three cheers for the married couple. That night many were so drunk that they slept along the twin roads back to the village, and for the first time in all its history there were women who were drunk too. I am no moralist, and thank God, I still have ample vices. I like a drink and a good meal both for myself and my fellows, but I know that that wedding dinner at the Hall did more ultimate harm to Heathley than all those grievances under which it supposedly and actually suffered, and for weeks afterwards the whole place was literally demoralized.

Then came the event to which I have referred and in which my father, and all our family, were vitally concerned. In *In This Valley* I have ascribed the happenings to Abner Webster, but the story perhaps will bear adjustment and restatement.

Field, the head keeper, was on excellent terms with my father for somewhat amusing reasons which you will subsequently learn. Mrs. Field, a character as lovely as any that I have known and for whom I shall always feel both gratitude and affection, was the closest friend my mother had. Her father, of whom also more anon, would come to our house on winter afternoons when he was down on holiday, and play draughts with my mother, and to all us children the Fields were especially kind.

Thanks to Field my father secured a lucrative contract from

Squire Green—nothing less than the annual supplying, mending and replacement of the hundreds of coops and wooden runs used in pheasant rearing. For there was nothing that my father, with a growing family to keep, would turn aside if it promised a reasonable return. I remember how he bought timber in bulk for the work and how a special man was hired to help, and how in the spring the shed where they worked smelt of pine-wood shavings. And that work was certainly a godsend. It enabled my father to set aside work less lucrative and it gave the whole household a financial stability.

Then came a certain election. Wilson—Sir Frederick Wilson—was the Liberal candidate, and Gurdon of the banking firm the Conservative. While the votes were being counted a certain Heathley Radical was in the town, too excited and anxious to wait till the result of the poll reached our distant village. It was he who brought my father private word that Wilson was in, and as he had a dry sense of the ironic, he further spread the rumour that it was Gurdon who was in, a piece of subterfuge that would give him a double victory over the local Tories. He also swore my father to secrecy.

It so happened that afternoon that my father was walking towards Lammas Meadows when he met Squire Green at the stile by the Devil's Pit Hole. Green was in high spirits. Whether or not Field had done some diplomatic lying on my father's behalf I do not know, but Green was definitely under the impression that my father was as rabid a Tory as himself.

'We've won then,' he announced. 'Given the Radicals another damn good hiding.'

My father tumbled to the error and gained his own ironic satisfaction in leaving Green to his mistake.

'Yes, sir. We've won right enough,' he said chuckling in his turn, and Green, still chuckling too, went on his way.

But later my father as often could not keep his tongue quiet. Some informer gave Green news of the trick that had been played and almost at once Field came round to our house. He had bad news. Not while my father lived, Green declared, would he earn another penny from the Hall.

The results were disastrous for us all and it took years to recover from the financial consequences. My father took it all philosophically at first but he was an embittered man.

'Let him keep his work,' he told Field, 'and do you tell him I said so. I lived in this parish before he came and I'll be here when he's forgotten.'

From then on I hated Green with every fibre of my small being. To him I raised no hat and when he was past I would even venture on a scowl or grimace. And I hated the things for which he stood, and his menials and the time-servers who spoke well of him in others' company.

But to another story. It was only a few months after the Green affair that word came to my father that Squire Finch had closed the little-known track across Illboro heath and river that made a short cut of miles towards the Harford turnpike. My father was furious, and my mother alarmed.

'Why should you worry yourself about that?' she said. 'You'll only make more trouble.'

'Worry?' My father stared incredulous. 'Someone's got to do somethin, haven't they?'

'I don't see it,' she said in her quiet way. 'And if something does have to be done, why shouldn't someone else do it? We've suffered enough as it is.'

My father's lip curled contemptuously. He knew that those who spoke loudest did least and that even in the District Council were plenty who were in the pockets of the squires.

'Suppose you make enmity now with Squire Finch,' my mother went on. 'Then he'll take Lammas Meadows away and where shall we be then?'

'Where?' said my father, and glared. 'Where we always were. Where we can get a living in spite of squires and everybody.' His voice rose as it always did when he made his terse and obstinate confession of faith. 'Neither man nor devil am I feered of. What's right is right, and that's that.'

The very next morning he put the horse in the cart and took a man and tools with him to the Illboro track. At the ford the gate was chained and locked as had been reported, so he removed both chain and padlock, saw the gate moving properly on its hinges and then snacked it and drove home. Finch had it fastened again, and again, and for weeks though urgent work had to be set aside, my father cleared the gate and drove his cart through as a personal satisfaction and a sign to any chance watcher that the track had always been public and that so it would remain.

Then Finch gave up the struggle. Maybe he had been misinformed about the track, though I still suspect it was Green who had requested the closing. But Finch took the defeat in perfect temper. There were no recriminations and never a hint that Lammas Meadows was likely to be needed for another tenant. And from those two events one may gather something of the difference between a hireling and a true shepherd. The metaphor is not too apt perhaps, but it should be added that whereas, but for his annual holiday, the Squire was always with us, Green made no winter appearances except for the shoots, and his days were divided between London and Newmarket when he was not at the Hall.

It is hard to appraise what good that tenancy of Hall and shooting did to Heathley itself, but it was far less than one may imagine. The money of employees was spent in the village but that village had never known unemployment in any case, and Green's rates of pay were no higher than his neighbours'. It is true he built a couple of fine cottages but they were for his keepers and far out in the heaths. Perhaps the only additional money that entered the village, for the Hall dealt with London Stores, was at the time of the shoots, and then every available man and boy were mustered for brushing, as we called beating, or to go on-stop, which latter meant taking up a fixed position and driving back the birds that broke away from the beaten line. The pay was half a crown a day and lunch, which was good enough when a labourer got eleven or twelve shillings a week for far longer hours. Boys got a shilling, and it was that sum which attracted me, and, of course, the lunch.

As I persisted in wishing to go on-stop, Field consented one raw January day and I duly took up the position assigned to me and armed myself with a stick. It was cold and slow work but I had that lunch to which to look forward. At last it came and one of the packages was thrust into my hand by the man who bore them round. What I had imagined I do not know, but probably a lunch of the calibre of that celebrated dinner. What I found when I removed the paper wrappings were two huge slabs of bread between which was a slice of very fat and practically raw beef, and my stomach turned at the first sight of it. There was also a slice of cheese and I ate that as it was, for the bread was soaked with blood from the beef.

And to add to the misfortunes of that first and only day's shoot, I was forgotten when the time came to knock off. It was the Illboro side of the estate over which they were shooting and my post was in a ride in the woods that sloped down to the marshes. There I stayed till dusk was near and then decided to disband myself. But I had left it too late and darkness fell. The raw mists of night descended and soon I was lost. I ran and I hollered and at last found myself far away from home on the Illboro road where it nears the main turnpike towards Larford. There I knocked at a cottage door and the kindly couple made me tea and gave me food and then set me on my way. It was very late when at last I reached home. The keepers had been informed and they and my father were out in the mists searching for me. Never had I seen him so pleased as at the sight of me.

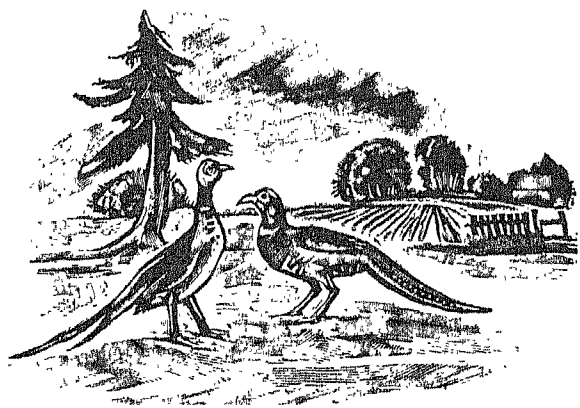
There are many stories I could tell of Squire Green and one which I cannot help telling, and my solemn word is pledged that there is no exaggeration.

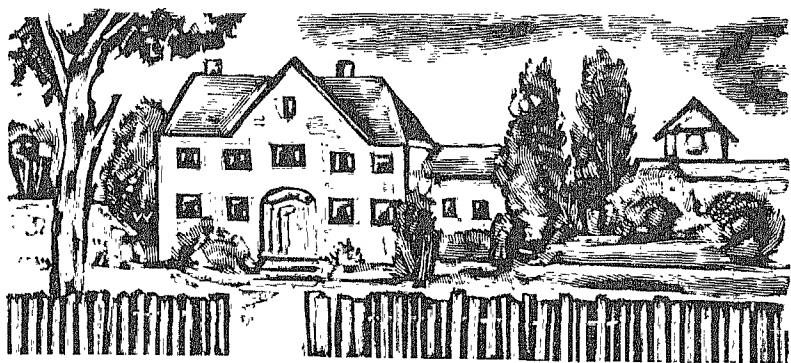
A maid had broken a window of the study. The butler sent to George Spline, that crony of my father who was in charge of the wood-yard and estate workmen, but George had no glass. Some was expected but had not arrived, so George approached my father. Now my father had been swindled by a travelling salesman over a crate of glass, having been attracted by the very low price and deceived by the fact that whereas the top sheets were of excellent quality, the bottom ones at which he had not looked were cast-offs, awry and distorted.

The good sheets had been used and the rest were in the crate, with my father awaiting a customer who would be a bigger fool than himself. When George came he was given a large sheet and his eyes saw nothing wrong with it, and the french-window was duly repaired. The next morning, a bright November day, Squire Green went to the study after breakfast as was his custom and as he sat there he saw a couple of pheasants moving on the lawn.

But they seemed queerly erratic birds that changed shape in the most peculiar manner and at times there was only one pheasant instead of two. So he got up to investigate and opened the window for a clearer view. Then he saw that instead of two pheasants there was only one hopping thrush. Next he looked through the glass again and at trees fantastic

and weird and monstrous flower-beds that were and were not. Then he uttered a bellow, seized the poker and smashed the french-window to smithereens, and when the frightened butler came running in, ordered him to fetch Spline. What happened then no one ever knew, for Spline told only his own version. But he had to put in a horse and go all the way to Ouseland for new glass. As for my father, he would laugh at that story till the tears ran.





Chapter IV

CHURCH AND STATE—*continued*

JOHN PARDON—‘the Reverend’ as we all knew him—had been the head master of one of the smaller Public Schools. He was a shortish man but with a fine patrician presence and with manners exquisite and unforced, and when he raised his hat to return my small salute he would do it with the same easy grace as he would have done to a duchess. His silvery beard, trimmed to a point, had streaks of the original gold, and on the rare occasions when we saw him hatless, his hair showed the same golden markings and in some peculiar way it gave his face a rare and elusive distinction. When he walked, idly swishing his stick, his eyes would be on the ground, but every few seconds he would look up, and almost perkily as a blackbird does on a lawn.

The income from the Heathley living was about four hundred pounds but the Reverend had private means. There were usually three maids at the vicarage, and I can still see their pink print dresses and white cuffs, and as they were generally imported they ended as village wives. Wakely Sayer was his coachman-gardener. Like Shaw at Little Heathley, Wake drove abroad in livery and high cockaded hat, and a fine figure of a man he looked as he held the reins and gave a gentle but artistic flick with the silver-mounted whip.

Of the Reverend’s family of four, only a son and a daughter were closely connected with the village. Lancelot—to us Master Lance—was at school on my arrival and shortly

afterwards went up to Cambridge, but on his holidays he made a valuable member of the cricket team. His sister Maud—you will have noticed the influence of Tennyson—played the organ at church and helped generally in church matters. I liked her enormously, for she was friendly and hearty and would hail me from a distance by my Christian name.

But her mother was always for me a terrifying figure and very much of a *grande dame*. Never do I remember to have seen her smile. And she was tall, slow-moving, and superbly poised, and when I met her I could do no more for the life of me than scrape off my cap and mumble a something which I trust she took for a greeting. My mother liked her, however, but as her calls on us were made when the children were at school, we saw little of her. My father disliked her, thinking her a reactionary influence on the Reverend, and he was sure that her calls were for the gleanings of information. There was also the supposition, far from authenticated, that the parish sick received a tin—a round milk-can, that is—of vicarage soup, which seemed to him a renunciation of liberty and self-respect for the sake of Egyptian flesh-pots. I can still see the curl of his lip when it happened to be mentioned that So-and-so was ill—not in the matters, as our expression was.

‘He’ll be all right,’ he would say, ‘as soon as he get some of that vicarage soup into him.’

Of the Reverend’s private charities I know nothing but I do know that he visited the sick of chapel and church alike. As for his sermons, and those I heard for many years if at longer intervals than I ought to confess, they were homely Christian doctrine with subtle touches of scholarship, and they lasted from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour, and that, for a rustic congregation, was the perfect length. I can say, too, that almost all spoke well of him, and that his approach was never announced and avoided as was that of even the Squire. If indeed there is truth in the claim that an established church meant that every village had at least its one gentleman, then Heathley was lucky, for in Finch and Pardon it had two.

The Hall lay some two hundred yards west of the church and a private gate opened on a brick path that led to a private door. In that my father rightly saw some association of Church and State, and also in the fact that between altar and pulpit were private pews unoccupied except by the Finches

on one side or Green and visitors from the Hall on the other.

'Why should he sit by himself?' I heard my father once demand, and referring to Green. 'If he've an immortal soul, so have all the others that go there, haven't they? And he'll have to answer for himself the same as they will. He won't get no special seat then, will he? Nor no private gate to slip in by neither.'

Another association that would anger him was the fact that on the labourers' only holidays of the whole year—Good Friday and Christmas Day—a condition of the holiday was that the recipient should attend church in the morning. There indeed was damning proof of the unholy alliance, especially as it was said that Flora Finch took notes of the absentees. Of the truth of that latter I cannot speak. As for Pardon's alliances with the Squire or Green to the detriment of Heathley or its interests, I can recall only one instance, and there I prefer to think that in a difficult situation he chose the line of least resistance.

And as chairman of the Parish Council he had a difficult team to handle, as John Balfour, the clerk, was later to tell me. Its four or five members would include a nominee of the Squire and perhaps also of Green; a farmer or two who would sail with the wind, and finally Bradford Billy—that is, William Cash—who was the district's most desperate Radical. But Pardon dined regularly both at Little Heathley and the Hall, and that helped whatever argument my father had in mind.

And yet in his heart of hearts my father liked and admired him. Pardon was for many years captain of our cricket team, and a fine captain and wicket-keeper he was. If by ill chance he was unable to play, my father—himself what might be called a fanatical cricketer—would be in despair.

'Bast the thing!' he would say when he heard the news, and then with a throwing up of hands would give way to despair. 'Might as well all stay at home. What's the good of going over to try and beat So-and-so if the Reverend ain't there?'

And when Master Lance was at home and the news came that he would be playing for us on the Saturday, my father would be all smiles and cock-a-hoop. Lance was a terrifying fast but remarkably erratic bowler—and we pronounced

the word to rhyme with *bowler*. When wickets were granite hard and bumpy, he scared out more than he bowled.

'Bast! Won't they be hoppin about?' my father would say to me as he visualized the opposing batsman, and his eyes would twinkle and he would give his sideways nod of the head.

At the early age of eleven I became a stop-gap member of the team and it was then that I learned to know and adore John Pardon. My only assets were that I could hold any catch and was quick in running, and daring on my feet against slow bowling, but small boy though I was I was treated in the team as man and boy alike. If I failed there would be neither expostulation nor blame, and whatever was worthy of praise received more than its share. The Reverend would see, too, that there was ginger-beer for a boy to drink when the men were at the ale cask and would make sure he had the chance of eating a man's-sized tea.

The great thing about the Reverend, and it is something that lies at the roots of the whole of that vague conflict between agricultural communities and the enemy known to me as Church and State, was that he fostered a man's self-respect. On the field or in the lanes he would call us—even my father—by our Christian names, and he would take us all into his counsel. So whatever scheme we had, it was one which we ourselves had helped to devise, though it might be only for the downfall of a particular batsman or the circumventing of a bowler, and it gave us pride and competence alike. No wonder that for years we were a formidable team, yokels and hobbledehoyes though for the most part we were. Yet when we were in John Pardon's company, if only for a minute, we knew we were men.

And therein, to my judgment, can be discerned the damning sin of squirearchy. A labourer was ordered, not consulted. He did this job and that as part of a routine, and far from initiative being encouraged, it was definitely stifled. He was moved arbitrarily from cottage to cottage, and often when his cottage was the Naboth's vineyard of some lickspittle or time-server. He was given no credit or reward for brains and no opportunities for self-improvement. And after generations of that there is no wonder that men became inarticulate and effortless, and pulled their forelocks to every Jack-in-office.

I see John Pardon then as a man among men, commanding

respect from his own innate qualities, and imparting that same respect to those who only in his company were aware that they possessed it. When in Church on Whit Sundays or at a Club dinner he addressed us as, 'Brother Oddfellows,' or 'Brother Foresters,' there was no questioning of the claim or the assertion. And he was a man with no foolish bigotry. When the time came for building a new chapel, and that was just after my arrival in the village, Finch gave a free site, even if my father remarked with his usual bias that it was far enough out of the main village so as not to offend his eyes. Green gave a handsome sum, but his subscriptions to this and that were so monotonous and lavish that they had long ceased to surprise. But of the Reverend little if anything was expected. It is true that in the village there was only a last remnant of hostility or rather of suspicion of Chapel against Church, and that a dim survival of Wesley's days, coupled with the knowledge that if a farm fell vacant a new-comer stood more chance of its tenancy if he were not Chapel. A few old bigots still lingered perhaps who classed the Church with Roman Catholics and even atheists, but when there was talk of venturing to ask the Reverend for a subscription there was in men's mind the hesitant thought that to ask the Church to support the Chapel was scarcely a reasonable proposition. Then after much argument Robert Addis and another chapel stalwart were sent as a deputation. Not only were they courteously received but the amount of the gift was a staggering surprise.

You may by this time be in agreement with the earlier assertion that in Heathley we were fortunate in both parson and squire. Perhaps you accept also the statement that the labouring part of Heathley was inarticulate, stolid and slow-thinking, and if so you will naturally wonder two things—to what extent unspoken injustices were real and how it could be that those who comprised the small underground movement, as I have called it, thought hostility and rebellion worth while. For necessarily they themselves must have had some security or they would not have dared to talk openly and instigate, and when a man is secure himself there must be strong reasons and spiritual urges that lend regard for the security and better-being of his fellows.

But first of all, what were the injustices that were always

present in men's minds? The first, the deepest and yet the most vague, was the ever present knowledge of petty tyrannies in villages nearby, as that which I have related at Wortley. Such things made a kind of pervasion. And there was no doubt that those who were vocal on behalf of squiredom and the system for which it stood did get such few plums as were going. In our village that was definitely the case with those who worked under Green, and it is equally true to assert that few if any were vocal in the opposite direction. One man who lived under Green was deftly ejected for too public an expression of Radical views. He didn't see why this and that should happen was his way of putting it.

At election times, then, the village was smothered with Tory placards and bills in red, which were their local colours. Blues were seen only in the windows of those who did not live under the Squire, as we called it. I remember at that first election—the one that cost my father dear—I was in despair, for all Heathley seemed enthusiastically Tory. At Liberal meetings in the school only a few attended and there would be no enthusiasm. When meetings were outdoors on the Mound, men listened from a distance and made no comments. But when the Tory came the school would be packed, and there would be, "Three cheers for Gurdon!" from Field and others, and cheering and laughter that could be heard far away, and Green himself would probably be in the chair.

Never did I spend so miserable a time, though the chief thing I recall about it to-day is something that seems almost too trifling to record. Helpers were wanted to distribute handbills to outlying cottages and I was a willing volunteer, though chiefly for the sake of the sixpence of reward. Among the literature was a photograph of Gladstone, and the caption: 'Don't be misled! Follow the Grand Old Man.'

That caption puzzled me. Not that part about the Grand Old Man, for we had a huge portrait of Gladstone in our sitting-room. And finally I spoke to my mother:

'Mother, what does the word mizzled mean?'

'Mizzled?' she said. 'I never heard of it. How do you spell it?'

I told her, and I shall never forget how she laughed.

Election day came and I was even more in despair. From the Hall, Little Heathley, and Tory farmers came traps, smart dog-carts, and wagonettes to fetch voters from outlying

farms and cottages, and we Liberals could hardly muster a sulky¹ or two. But when the poll was over, my father enlightened me, and with a heartiness that gave even me a confidence.

'Half them that ride in Tory carts and holler for Gurdon are the best Liberals we have,' he told me. 'When the ballot boxes are opened, Heathley's always one of the best we have. Two-thirds Liberal, and I know that for a fact.'

But of those other injustices whose existence was inescapable, the Game Laws were the most resented. Every man-jack of us was a poacher at heart, as southern coast men had been smugglers, and if we were caught our judges were the very squires who maintained the system. When a farmer or smallholder cut his corn, a keeper would be present to see that no game was shot or unduly disturbed. Even hares were classed as game, and in our parts they swarmed by the hundred. If a farmer set foot after rabbits in the woods that hemmed in his land he was guilty of trespass in pursuit, for woods were ground hallowed for the safe laying of pheasants' eggs and the roosting of the grown birds.

It was resentment against such things that Radicals kept alive and that their efforts were not without avail could be seen by the results of elections. For better wages and conditions there was little agitation since there was no union, and all contrived somehow to live, and conditions in Breckland compared not unreasonably with those that prevailed throughout the county. As for those who were the mainstay of that underground movement, who hinted here and dropped a shrewd word there, they were three only, and each was a man of outstanding personality.

I begin with my father because of him you have already heard. He was the fiery, hot-tempered man of action, who did and risked while others lay low. Though his land was under Finch, as I have said, his actual house was in private ownership and the owner a wealthy Methodist at that, so that whatever his enormities in the eyes of Toryism there would always be a roof over his head, and he had a confidence, moreover, in his own strength and inventive genius. His feelings I believe to have been both genuine and deep. What he discerned, if only dimly, was that he was fighting for

¹ Small cart mounted directly on the axle.

eternal values, and the vision, blurred though it might be by prejudice and personal animosity, was always there.

But a far more dominating personality was William Cash, whom the village knew as Bradford Billy. His father was a local farmer and still living on my return to the village, but William had been forced to leave Heathley in his youth, either as a result of some escapade or for too forcible an expression of Radical opinions. His father had been a tailor and William became a tailor in Bradford, and in that stronghold of Radicalism he learned much, even if his vast reading was often ill-digested. Then after many years he returned to Heathley, and to his own house, and there opened a tailor's shop. It was he also who sold the weekly papers which he fetched in his pony-cart from Wortley Station every Friday night. So desperate was his Radicalism that with almost bated breath it was whispered that his own paper was that known to us as *Reynolds's*.

He was a man of commanding presence, tall, well-held, and deliberate of movement, and his goatee beard—the only one in all our district—somehow set him apart. His voice, tinged with a northern accent, had always the sly quality of innuendo, and irony was his principal weapon. It was he who lent me *Alton Locke*, which I read many times before I was in my teens, and there were other books that he lent me too, such as *Hypatia* and *Past and Present*. That last I found heavy going, until I came to the middle section which, as you may know, relates the life and work of the great Abbot Sampson. Imagine my amazement and delight when I read that the young man who had determined to be a monk had left his native village of Tottley early one morning and had come across country to the Peddars' Way which would lead him straight to the abbey at Bury St. Edmunds. At that some irresistible urge drove me to read that book on Tottley Heath and I used to make my way there and lie under a clump of pines that overlooked the ancient track.

But the influence of Cash was limited largely to the older generation, most of whom were beyond conviction, and even among them his influence slowly waned. For in the eyes of the village youths and all the younger generation he was a subject for baiting and caricature. Heathley had no use for accents other than its own, and the rare Londoners who came to stay with relatives were regarded as queer fish. Then there

was Cash's pontifical slowness of speech and the pompous aloofness of his walks in public, and it was as Bradford Billy that he was referred to behind his back and not as Mr. Cash. In the nickname was derision and it was a derision that Cash's enemies fostered.

In the upstairs room of an empty cottage south of the school was what was known as the Reading Room, and there the older lads and young men would assemble of a winter evening to play bagatelle on a decrepit board, or cards and draughts, though often the night would end in horseplay of the roughest. The daily paper—*The Eastern Daily Press*—arrived there from Wortley Station early in the afternoon and Cash, as a member, would sit there and read it in peace. But when the paper was delayed he would be forced to come in the evening, and then it was the aim of 'them chaps' as the village called them, to harass and annoy. Once he found the paper wrapped around something and when he unwrapped it, that something fell out. Thereupon he insisted on an immediate meeting of the somewhat helpless committee and described what had happened. One member, who found his accent hard to follow, asked again what had been wrapped in the newspaper. Cash drew himself up.

'Haven't I told you?' he said. 'A rot. A great rot!'

That phrase, with Heathley's idea of his pronunciation of *rat* was for long a catch-phrase, and it was such things that made Cash a smaller man. For had he taken himself less seriously from the first and laughed with those who tried their crude jokes, I think the village would have had for him not only respect but some measure of affection, and he might have become a tremendous power from within the village instead of from without, and through a Rural District Council.

I dwell upon William Cash because even in his later impotency he was a figure that dominated the village, and in his contemptuous aloofness and as contemptuous appearances, very much of an enigma. But in his early years his Radicalism was fearless, and he was the recognized chairman at meetings and his house election headquarters. In our local branch of the Oddfellows' Society he was the principal figure, and there the village was incalculably in his debt. Thanks to his handling and control the branch was the most flourishing in the district, and I have often wondered whether it was his influence

that accounted for the fact that nine-tenths of the Oddfellows were Liberals, just as most Foresters were Conservatives.

He was a shrewd man of business and as soon as tailoring no longer paid, he set up as a coal merchant and prospered. And there again one unhappy remark did enormous harm to the cause.

He was a careful man and lived sparingly and in the village he had no competitor in the coal trade. So when a customer drew only a hundredweight or two behind in his payments, he would make a personal call, and unless he received his money would threaten either to cut off supplies or bring the debtor to court. One man protested that to pay money down was often hard, especially when a large family had to be fed.

'Fed?' said Cash. 'I live on a herring a day and so can you and they.'

Those were the days when a box of Yarmouth bloaters could be bought for a shilling so no wonder the village scorned a standard so low. And at the next meeting he was heckled and asked to reconcile the statement with his public pleas for a higher standard of living for the labourer.

But the whirligig of time brought its revenges. Cash saved and saved and his money was invested in little properties which he bought for a song. Later he would boast of owning stocks and shares. Finally he ended his days, and by virtue of a rotation chairmanship of a Rural District Council, as a magistrate, and as near a Tory as makes no difference.

I can see him still in his walks through the village, head high and unmoving, but with eyes that marked each movement and change. When men saw him coming they would avoid him, but if he met a man his lip would curl and he would make some dry, ironic remark that had a bearing on local politics or the established system. And as if neither expecting a reply nor wanting one he would walk straight on, and with something of amused contempt, steps always unhurried and eyes on the distance ahead.

Of his motives you may have made your own estimate. As a friend he was treacherous for he would brook no rival near his self-appointed throne, and it was his personal profit and the warming of his own enmities that lay nearest his heart. As an enemy he was ruthless and utterly unscrupulous.

My father and he were at first hand in glove and then something happened. Cash was a school manager and when

the time came for contracting for the annual supply of coal, he was ineligible by virtue of his office. But his son, then with a bakery business along the Shopleigh Road, put in a tender in his own name and secured the contract. That was a something my father could not stomach, and it was his principal grievance against the Reverend that he had sat by as chairman and let so scandalous an arrangement pass unchallenged. At any rate my father spoke his mind and thereafter he had an enemy who made him pay dear.

But at this distance of years I own freely that there was much that my boyhood owed to William Cash. Like others, and not least myself, he was his own enemy. Self-discipline and a vision wider and more clear might have made him a tremendous power in Liberalism and indeed a notable man. Even a sense of humour that pivoted less on personal ironies might have taken him far beyond the position in local and parochial politics to which he ultimately attained, and in which he took so amusing and portentous a pride.

The third in the triumvirate was Peacock, the Prudential Insurance agent. Where he first gained a passion for politics and an interest in his fellow men I do not know, but he came of Radical stock. When I first returned to the village he was a young married man, and my first contact with him was when I shot off a popgun at a venture and the acorn struck his toddling son plumb in the middle of the forehead.

His cottage was privately owned and in a way he had more freedom than either of his elders, and his opportunities to serve the cause were far greater, for his round included not only all Heathley to its remotest confines but the fringes of neighbouring hamlets as well, and when a man is expected to be a bringer of news he has no difficulty in distributing doctrine.

At first he was a collaborator with Cash. Then came the inevitable break and the two became bitter enemies. But Cash received far more than he gave, for Peacock had in his armoury the one weapon that the other lacked, an indomitable cheerfulness and the gift of poking sly fun. But after the break with Cash, Peacock became close to my father, though I would not call him a disciple. For he had a patience that my father never possessed and a vision less blurred. My father believed, and most confidently at election times, that the Breckland world could be changed by some simple

legislative process. Peacock, eternal optimist though he was, saw deeper and farther, and maybe because his roots were in the present and his contacts more numerous and vital.

He became a local preacher and I remember his sermons for their homely imagery, and their plain-speaking enlivened always by a quiet humour. To me he was always something of a hero for even between elections he would canvass for the cause and speak at open-air meetings. A determined attempt was made to dislodge him, for an anonymous letter was written to his superiors denouncing his political activities as harmful to his work. But that letter—and most guessed its authorship—missed fire badly, for Peacock was a go-ahead canvasser whose returns always showed a year as better than its predecessor.

Later he set up in the drapery business and made a useful living at it. It gave him, too, more time for local and district affairs, and when Labour, the natural successor of Radicalism, came to the fore, he threw himself into that movement with all the vigour of his earlier years. Then, and no man rejoiced more than I or so richly savoured the irony, he became a magistrate!

And if the word irony needs explaining, what I hasten to add is this. It was that a Radical and a rebel should occupy, and with distinction, a seat among those whose fathers had been the die-hard supporters of those things against which Peacock had fought and which my boyish mind had learned to lump together, as we say, under the convenient title of Church and State.





Chapter V

THE RISING GENERATION

THE Risin Generation—that was what George Spline called the youth of the village; at least it was a phrase that he used when he prayed in Heathley chapel on a Sunday night at prayer meeting.

When he had exhausted the few preliminaries, all of which we knew by heart, he would come to the subject for which all we boys were shamefacedly waiting.

‘Lord, bless the risin generation,’ he would say. ‘Bless our boys and girls and our young people.’

But he would never get any farther. Sometimes he would not get beyond the ‘boys’, for he was a man of turgid and easily summoned emotions and his voice would be quavering by the time he had mentioned the rising generation and would then be an incoherence of blubbering and tears. I would always wince at that display of emotion and could see in it no sincerity. It was true that George occasionally assisted in the Sunday School and I still remember a necktie that he always wore. It was of shot silk, the general effect a vivid green that turned to a lilac when the light changed it. I loved that tie. It was an ambition of mine that as soon as I was a man I would buy one like it.

But in daily life George, with the keepers,¹ ranked as a deadly enemy. On the Park alongside the churchyard and in full view of the Hall was a sweet-chestnut that grew the largest nuts I have ever seen on a tree in England. To say they were as fine as the best Spanish nuts is no exaggeration, and as

¹ Gamekeepers.

soon as they were reported falling we boys would make our way there. The churchyard was surrounded by trees and even the brick paths were hemmed in with box and holly, which made in autumn a smell that was earthy and funereal. In that undergrowth we would conceal ourselves and hunt for sticks and missiles to hurl up the tree. When the coast was reported clear of gardeners on the Hall lawns we would emerge and up would be hurled the sticks and down would come the nuts. But before we had been there ten minutes there would be the sound for which we had all been listening. George's house overlooked the Park and the road to the church, and either he would observe our stealthy approach or his ears were amazingly sensitive to the sound of hurtling sticks among the boughs. But we would hear him coming. He was a big man, ruddy of hair and hue and much given to perspiration. 'Darn yel' he would holler as soon as he neared. 'I know who y'are.'

Then we would scatter among the box and holly and he would be hollering and shaking his stick and in full view of the Hall, and always the last thing he did was to mop his face and neck with a huge red handkerchief. I know now that those exhibitions were for the benefit of Squire Green and that his claiming to know us was a bluff, for he never complained to my father. Indeed, when the nuts were toasted at night, my father would eat his share and knew well enough the tree from which they came.

In Heathley the rising generation was of two classes. The jevveniles—or in your more fashionable English, juveniles—were children still at school, and the term 'them chaps' comprised lads who had left school and the young unmarried men. Of the girls I know little, except that when they left school most seemed to go into domestic service in neighbouring towns and villages, though the daughters of farmers would help in house and dairy.

Heathley school served not only the village and its outlying parts but the fringes of all neighbouring villages as well. Of mornings and all the year round you would see the children tramping in from the confines of Illboro, from cottages beyond the Top Breck, from Brackford and even a hamlet that lay beyond it towards Shopleigh. There were a hundred and fifty of us, from those who could just manage the walk to strapping lads and louts of fourteen whose parents could

afford to leave them at school until the time of official withdrawal. Clothes were much of a muchness. Boys wore corduroys and stout hobnail boots, and the girls all had their pinafores. They were a motley, noisy, unruly crowd; and immediately after morning and afternoon school our orders were to come home at once. It was not snobbery or the thought that we should be contaminated by playing with our fellows; it was just a natural precaution. In an annexe of the main building the schoolmaster's wife, Mary Balfour, with a young assistant, looked after the infants. John Balfour was in charge of all the rest and with him would be a pupil teacher and a sort of apprentice. The time will come later to speak of John Balfour, but already you may have some idea of the daily task that confronted him.

Among all the causes of rural depopulation there are two which I have rarely heard mentioned, if at all. Of these one was avoidable. The other, at which we shall arrive in this chapter, was inevitable and a mere incident in the course of scientific progress.

To my way of thinking it was the curriculum of a village school of fifty years ago that contributed most to the ultimate depopulation. It is difficult to speak temperately of those who bore the responsibility, but undoubtedly the education of rural England was directed from Whitehall by those whose knowledge of the countryside and its problems must have been less than superficial. A general yard-stick of curriculum convenience regimented and controlled us. As examples of incompetence, ignorance, and indifference, those curricula are surely unique.

Take a purely negative appraisal. There was no domestic science of even the most elementary and theoretical type, nor handicrafts for the lads. The rudiments of farming by which the village lived, were untaught, and the principles of cropping husbandry, or even gardening, and that though there was ample land available for each grown lad to have had his tiny plot. Of knowledge of the countryside, its fauna, flora, and history, nothing was ever imparted. Leisure of the immediate present or the ultimate future was wholly uncatered for and there were no organized games.

What then was taught? The Three R's certainly and thoroughly if within the stringent and closely defined limits of the curriculum. Writing was emphasized, but only when

'writing' became a set lesson, which meant copying some printed and usually incomprehensible motto a dozen times in copper-plate in a special book till a page was filled. At other times we used slates, and copper-plate was impossible. Reading was from various antiquated 'Readers' well known to our fathers and mothers, and their contents the quick-witted among us soon knew by heart. In arithmetic, once the tables and the elements were known, we came to 'Problems': quantities of wall-paper required for rooms, the filling and emptying of mysterious tanks, the speeds of locomotives and ultimately there would come a long period spent over stocks and shares. Even I—and I say that because my wits were as quick as most—saw no connection between those mysterious terms and any business transactions with which I was acquainted, and when Bradford Billy would boast of his investments I doubt if six people in the village had the vaguest notion of what he meant by stocks and shares.

History consisted of a couple of weekly lectures given by John Balfour to the upper half of that very mixed assembly, and of the nineteenth century and the elements of local government nothing was taught. Geography meant copying maps and printing place-names neatly, or we would commit to memory and recite, parrot-fashion, the rivers of a continent or the towns on some great river. Music consisted of attempts to follow John Balfour's pointer as it moved from note to note on the chart of tonic sol-fa, and of the learning by heart of two new songs each year. These would be sung in unison and so trivial were they that I cannot for the life of me recall the name of even one.

In English, literature was disregarded except for the learning by heart of certain printed extracts handed to us on cards. One was a selection from Shelley's *Sky-lark*. Even now I cannot help smiling grimly at the thought of us wrestling with

'Profuse strains of unpremeditated art.'

Of creative written work I remember little, but sometimes a story would be read to us from a printed series and we would be told to reproduce it in our own words. The time available for John Balfour to assess the value of, or even to correct those efforts may be estimated. As for drawing, that was never of natural objects. Once the elements of perspective were taught we drew cubes, rectangles, triangles, and cones

from the usual papier-mâché models, and the principal thing was the 'finishing-off', which meant an erasure of what was called rough work and a rendering of the whole in a clear line with a well-sharpened pencil on which we bore heavily. 'Drawing in Freehand' was a term familiar to us, but surely hands were never less free.

Such was education in Heathley. When at a very early age I left for the ancient Grammar School at Ouseland—a departure that was a nine days' wonder, so great a break was it with tradition—young men who had been my immediate predecessors at the village school would come to the house and ask if I might do some 'measuring up'. That was for piece work and generally for areas of beet that had been 'chopped out', which was our term for singling. Thanks to the private coaching I had received from John Balfour I was able to work out acreages, and that they were roughly correct is shown by the fact that never did I know them questioned by steward or agent. I mention that merely as a comment on the value of our arithmetic and its remoteness from our daily lives.

What pride or pleasure derived from his schooling would a Heathley youth then take in his work or his village? What outlet was there for energy or interest? for even the monotonous and arduous work on a farm would still leave unexhausted the abundant energy of youth. The little he retained from his years of school was the ability to read, and yet the love of reading and all its adventurous exploration could never be implanted in him. But of that there will be more to say when we come to talk of the Mound and 'them chaps'.

As I may have indicated, we children of the Home family were somewhat segregated in our leisure, for not only did we have to come straight home from school, but in the evenings were never allowed to go near the centre of the village and the Mound. That again was not snobbery but the wisest of precautions, for the horseplay there was the roughest and the language often coarse. The children with whom we played were carefully selected, and most of our summer evening leisure was spent at that ruined thatched cottage owned by Bradford Billy and at a game of our own devising, at least I never heard it mentioned or saw it elsewhere. It was called, 'Up for Colley', and that last word is purely phonetic for I

have never seen it in print. It was played with a tennis ball which was thrown high on the thatched roof with the thrower calling the name of some other player. That player had to catch the ball as it fell from the eaves. If he caught it he became the thrower and called another name. If he dropped it we scattered and ran and he had to throw it. If he hit a player, the one struck had a point scored against him, but if he missed, the point was scored against himself. Three points were enough to put one out and so the game proceeded until the winner alone was left.

But that was a game we played with the girls, if there were not enough boys for cricket. Cricket was played with a soft ball on a very wide grass verge immediately opposite the chapel, where we would be rarely disturbed by passing horses and carts. My father, who wanted his boys to be cricketers, had bought for us at an auction a collection of cricket gear which included some real bats, and of boys' sizes, and I remember that they had originally been used by the Mann family, one of whom became subsequently the captain of Middlesex. Almost the only spectator we ever had was strangely enough William Cash, who would halt for a few moments as he passed on his evening walks. But he would never speak to us and on his face would be that dour ironical smile. Maybe he would be thinking of his own youth, for then he had been a cricketer and it was said that he was the most notable long-stop Heathley ever had, for he would stuff his socks and so cover his shins with grass that he could stop a ball with them as efficiently as a wicket-keeper with his pads.

But Spring was a trying time for the sons of farmers and those who owned horses, for the young grass appears more quickly on roadside verges than in meadows, and it was our lot to mind the horses while they grazed. As each farmer had his recognized road or lane it meant that the minder was generally alone until dusk and with little except bird-nesting to pass the time. Our principal amusement on those long evenings was to make whistles out of young sycamore and hazel. This was a fairly simple process. By moistening the wood with spittle and tapping it with our shut-knives the bark could be removed whole, and then the wood could be cut away to make a blow hole and another hole for the insertion of a pea, after which the bark was replaced.

Such things may sound naïve to a sophisticated generation but for all our toys we had to depend upon our own creative and inventive efforts. In autumn each boy would pride himself on the possession of a popgun. These were made from elder and if possible of wood at least two inches in diameter and a foot in length, and as a piece of that size had to be cut between the knots of a stem it took a considerable deal of finding. But we scoured the woods and dodged the keepers, and then one day I discovered in that wood at Moat Farm among the cob-nut bushes a vast clump of elder from which I could cut a gun of almost eighteen inches length and that made me the envy of every boy in Heathley.

From the elder the pith was removed and generally with the co-operation of George Dew, the blacksmith, who burnt it out with a red-hot rod. A notch was cut to mark the end in which a half acorn would be inserted. The stick or firing rod was always of sere hazel, shaped to fit the pith hole with the rest of the wood as a handle and stop. On the end we would spit and hammer it on the ground till the fibres spread and made a firing cushion. In the far end would be inserted a half acorn, the projectile of another half acorn would be inserted in the business end, the handle of the stick would be planted firmly against the stomach and the stick rammed home. Out would go the fired acorn and one would be left in the end for the firing of a new shot.

As for the rest of our games, they followed each other yearly in precise rotation—hoops (iron ones made by Dew) for those who could afford them, and then marbles, and finally tops, the last often home-made. So much for Spring and early Summer. On hot summer afternoons in the holidays the village boys would go bathing, or wading as we always called it, in the pits of farms or the Common. Village mothers encouraged this for it saved official washing, but their views might have been changed had they seen the black mud and green slime with which we would be coated when we emerged. Bathing costumes and towels were unknown to us and we would run stark naked till the hot air dried us. I, being of an adventurous turn of mind, would go with my particular crony to the Plains and there run the gauntlet of the keepers.

But what I would most look forward to in the spring was a day's nesting, not for ordinary eggs, but for those of water-hens and wild ducks. All the family would look forward to

those days, for when the eggs were brought home my mother would line a huge dish with pastry and there would be a delicious egg custard for the family. All of us had our share, and I, as the founder of the feast, was generally given a second helping.

For me those were days of tremendous excitement for I would venture into haunts unknown by village boys, far out on the heaths and in the woods and often within a few yards of the house of a keeper. My weapon would be a long willow rod on the end of which was tied a tablespoon, and if the nest was in deep water and unapproachable by any other means, the eggs could be removed one by one with the aid of the spoon. Then they would be tested in water. If they sank at once they were fresh. If they fell rather sluggishly they were just tainted, but I was always furious when my mother discarded them, for their taste in my opinion would have been as good. Often a nest would have to be left because it was utterly inaccessible, and in that context I cannot help relating a tragedy that comes back to me as vividly as if it were only yesterday.

I had been through the Illboro low meadows and swamps and by the time I had eaten my frugal lunch I had had a miraculously successful morning, and the large tin which I always carried was piled high with the eggs of water-hens. Then at the very last pit on the homeward journey I saw a nest. It was in a wood and in the middle of deep black water at the root of a fallen tree, and so deep was the water that the tree itself was submerged. I climbed a larch on the bank and from there could see that the nest had in it many eggs, but how to reach them was beyond me, for they were yards from the full length of my willow-pole. So I stripped to the skin and tried wading, but before I had stepped in a couple of yards the icy water so pained my legs and ankles that I scrambled out again. Then I had an idea. The great storm of a few years before had strewn the wood with fallen trees, and I hunted about till I found a short fallen section of oak, which could be used as a raft. It was too heavy to carry or even move, so with a pole I levered it towards the bank. As it reached that bank and was about to topple over I heard a queer crunching sound. What it could be I could not imagine, and then when the log turned again at my levering, I knew, for I had rolled it over my tin of eggs! Never shall

I forget my despair. It was beyond grief and tears, and even to this day I can hear that tragic and heartrending crunch.

If I describe very briefly one of our winter evenings in the house, it is because it probably resembled the evening of other families of the same class as ourselves. If visitors were not expected the evening would be spent in the living-room, and after tea we would gather round the fire. My father had made for us children a whole series of tiny stools and chairs, and he would sit in his grandfather chair reading a book or the newspaper after a day in the fields. But he took great pride in himself as a fire-maker and it would annoy him that we children should be sitting with noses near the grate, and when it was too much for him he would spring to his feet.

'I don't know,' he would say. 'I think I can shift you, together. If not, I'll suffer to be hung.'

Then he would stir the fire and pile on logs interspaced with shiny coal and in a few minutes our stools and chairs would be shuffling back. Then he would be chuckling to himself and it was in such genial moments that he would lay aside his paper and begin to talk.

Often my mother would play games with us. When the lamp was lighted the heavy green tablecloth would be spread and out would come the Ludo board and we would play till it was time for the girls to go to bed. Cards, except Happy Families and Snap, were unknown in the house, for they came under the heading of the Devil's Picture-books. But occasionally we would play Halma, though that was too difficult for the younger ones, and well I remember the first introduction of Tiddly-Winks. Sometimes I would play draughts with my mother or father, but always with a hope that they had forgotten the clock and my time for bed. Then at about half-past nine my father would utter his usual formula, and I would hear it from my bedroom if I was still awake. There would be the shuffle of his feet, the scrape of his chair on the bricks as he pushed it back, and then: 'Well, I think I'll be going up Wooden Hill.'

And by half-past nine, except for the rare stray revellers from the village pubs, the whole village would be in bed and most would be asleep. But there was nothing uncanny about the quiet, and even the heavy dark had its friendly and

particular sounds. There would be the cry of an owl perhaps, and in summer the swish of a bat or a lumbering may-bug. And friendliest of all would be a sound that came from a far distance—the barking of a dog from some keeper's cottage or lonely farm far out on the brecks or heaths.

'Them chaps' would spend their winter evenings in the Reading Room, as I have said; but it is of their summer evenings that I want to speak, and of that second reason which in my view contributed to rural depopulation.

On a summer evening from about six o'clock those lads and young men would assemble on the Mound, and there they would play till well after dusk. There would be forty or fifty of them perhaps, and in that confined space they seemed a veritable multitude. There would be an audience too, for older men would lean against a wall and watch, and others at the *Lion* would sit at the benches with their beer mugs. What I remember of the Mound is the shouting, the laughter, and the wild tumultuous life. Rounders was a favourite game, for the trees made convenient bases, and there would be so many in the fielding side that to sneak a move from base to base was a feat in itself. Sometimes, when they tired of Rounders, they would organize a game of Hare and Hounds, and the whole village would hear them yelling and running down Wortley Road and across Stile Meadow maybe, or Parliament Path, and as they neared, mothers would call in the younger children and close their doors till the mad rush had swept by. Sometimes there would be a clod fight on the Mound. Sides would be chosen and the weapons would be grass sods wrenched from the verges, and these they would hurl at each other and often at the passers-by. I remember well one evening when on some authorized errand I was passing the Mound and a clod fight was on. Young Lister, son of John Lister of the miraculous adze and himself the deadliest of shots, saw me stand and gape and promptly hurled at me a huge clod that landed clean in the pit of my stomach. My mouth closed, my knees sagged, and for a moment I knew the bitterness of death. Then I wheezed, gurgled, and groaned, and then at long last my breath came slowly back, and with green face and unsteady legs I sidled unnoticed on my way.

Of the other activities of 'them chaps' more will be said in due course. But suddenly all that young life began to

disappear and in a year or two it had completely gone, and it might be worth while to find for ourselves the reasons why.

I have said that Heathley was self-contained. Practically our only contacts were with the neighbouring villages whom we played at cricket. So remote were we that even the adjacent Midlands were known to us vaguely as the Sheers. London was something of which we read in the newspaper, or saw when we looked at the gays, which was our name for illustrations. It is true that some of our younger men of the required standard would occasionally become policemen at Norwich, and more rarely, in London itself; but such departures were uncommonly few.

To most places to which we wished to go, we walked. When the pony was not available, my mother would even walk four miles each way to the dressmaker, and for a man to walk to Hareborough and back, which was twelve miles, was accounted as nothing. Bicycles were few, heavy, and clumsily made and with the hard tyres that gave them, for us, the persistent name of bone-shakers. In my earliest days the cushion tyre appeared and bicycles began to be more numerous, though among the labouring classes they were still rare. Then came the invention of the pneumatic tyre and the drop-handle, each in its way not only to revolutionize the comfort of the bicycle and to increase its range, but to give it a fascination it had not hitherto possessed. William Cash's son set up a bicycle shop and there was a system of easy payments, and in less than no time there was no lad or youth in the village who had not the ambition to own a bicycle. And that, in my view, was the second contributory cause of rural depopulation.

Once the young men had their bicycles the Mound began to pall. Like a flock of wild-fowl they would be away at nights to a flower show perhaps in some distant village, or to a fête or circus in a neighbouring town, and then there would descend upon Heathley a silence such as in summer it had never known. If there was a moon the whole band would set out for Norwich, which was twenty-three miles away. There was a Hippodrome there and every kind of attraction that would hold them till long after dark, and then in the late moonlight we would hear them riding home. At Norwich, and even in the smaller towns, they made new contacts. They saw the houses of town-dwellers, and their amenities

and learned of their wages, and there is no wonder that the towns drew them like a magnet. Thirty years ago one saw on the Mound of a summer evening only a handful of small children at their play. With the departure of 'them chaps' the ancient Reading Room went, though a new one was ultimately built in its place. In it were no baiters of William Cash, or games and wild horseplay, for it was administered by a committee who controlled only too easily the rare lads and youths who frequented it.

But when I think of the Heathley of fifty years ago and on a summer evening, when I hear the playing of children, it is the Mound that comes back to my mind. To me they are not all familiar faces that are gone, but the shadowy faces of those I cannot recall even by name, and yet there is the recalling. For my own vanished youth there is only rarely a poignancy, but—and this you may find it hard to understand—for those lads and their cheerful voices, wild horseplay, and young abounding vitality, there is always something beyond the arrogance of tears. And I think of them most in one peculiar and highly personal context: when by chance I hear that song of the Kerry Dancing and the youth of the Irish village and its scattered cabins at their evenings in the glen. For the Mound was our glen, and our youth, too, has gone, and it is not Ireland alone that holds a monopoly of that power of the individual heart to hymn its threnody for a vanished past.





Chapter VI

THE LABOURER AND THE LAND

I HAVE said that in Heathley there were many who remain vividly in my mind: men who being dead yet speak, and of whom Heathley will talk as my father talked of the giants of his own and his father's past. But they were not to be found among the agricultural workers—labourers, as we always called them—and reasons are not far to seek.

The pay of a Breckland labourer of fifty years ago was at the most twelve shillings a week. If he was a team-man or had stock to feed he was paid an extra shilling to compensate for his Sunday work. But those amounts must not be regarded as settled and perpetual payment. They were, indeed, liable to violent modifications. In a period of bad weather, as, for instance, of continued snow, or if work for some reason or other happened to be scarce or if there were advantage in its being deferred, then a labourer might be stood off and in that case he would have to obtain Parish Relief. Every winter a good many labourers would be thus stood off. Those who were still in employment had often to consider themselves fortunate for they had been transferred to helping the keepers or warreners or to clearing oddments of timber from the woods. But there was also a considerable deal of extra pay, and for what we call 'taking' work. I have already mentioned the singling of beet when the custom would be to pay so much an acre and the labourer could therefore work as long and as hard as he liked. Haysel was rarely 'taking' work and it was harvest that for the labourer was a harvest in more senses than one.

The custom was this. Through some peculiar channels word would come in that in the surrounding villages so much was being paid for harvest, and we will assume that that sum was five pounds. Thereupon Heathley labourers would send their various spokesmen to interview stewards or farmers and it might be agreed that a Heathley harvest should be five pounds also. Harvest then became work taken for the sum of five pounds, though such things as times of carting and the order in which fields were cut were under the control of the employer. I have known a harvest begun and finished in under a fortnight, but that was due to exceptional weather. The labourer accounted himself lucky if he finished in three weeks. I have also known periods of disaster when a harvest took so long that the labourer was very much out of pocket, and the flood year of 1912 was such a season, when corn cut in early August was still on the shock in late September.

Naturally the labourer at harvest had to work hard and long. Men might be mowing barley at earliest sun-up and carting wheat when the dew was heavy and dusk well in the sky, and yet if the weather were favourable he might earn four times his usual weekly wage. But there was more to it than that. The summer holiday had to coincide with harvest and any lad who was capable of work could find it on the farm on which his father was employed. There would, for instance, be rakes to drag and the most trustworthy could manage a horse rake. Then there was hollering 'Hold yel!' as we called it, which meant sitting on a horse when corn was being carted and hollering to warn the loader that the wagon was about to move. The pay of boys varied greatly and even from farm to farm, but it was a poor lad who could not earn ten shillings, and many got as much as thirty.

There then indeed was the labourer's annual harvest. The money that came in had to tide the family through the year. Rent might be deducted from it, and little accumulated bills might be settled at the local shops. Above all, the weeks after harvest saw special Harvest Sales, not only in Hareborough and Ouseland, but in Heathley itself, and clothes and household furnishings would be bought for the coming year.

The outgoings, other than food, were proportionately high. Rents varied from one shilling to as much as half a crown, but in the latter case the cottage would probably be a large one and in it would be the labourer's sons who also

worked on the land and contributed their quota to the house. A copper or two a week went to the Insurance Society, and for each senior member of the household; for burial with respect was a thing that was never far from the labourer's mind. Then there were the weekly contributions to his Friendly Society who would tide him over when he was sick, but took no account of unemployment. Something like a panel system prevailed and not until the Club doctor had certified the man as ill could he go 'on the Club' as we called it and draw sick benefit. Even if his disablement were only a sprained limb he was not allowed to leave the village or set his hand to any work. William Cash was a terror for nosing out a man who thought he could potter about in his garden or even earn an odd shilling in addition to his sick benefit.

The hours of a labourer varied with the sun, and the coming of spring was announced as early as St. Valentine's Day, and then a labourer worked from six to six. There was no half-holiday on a Saturday and if a young labourer wished to play cricket it meant an interview with the farmer or steward and such interviews were definitely discouraged. As for judging the passage of time most of the older labourers possessed an inherited watch of the kind known as a turnip—which we pronounce tannup—but the time could also be gathered from the sound of a train as it came through the woods towards Wortley Station. A man would say, 'There go the old quarter arter nine', or, 'Here come the old six o'clock,' and that might mean it was time to knock off.

A labourer's clothes were simple and easy enough to obtain in Heathley itself. Fifty years ago the smock had disappeared except for warreners and shepherds, and the usual garb would be what was called a sleeved waistcoat with corduroy trousers and stout boots, and if the job demanded it, buskins, as we called leggings. His working hat would be something with a broadish brim and known as a 'Chummy'. His Sunday suit would usually be the black broadcloth in which he had been married or which he had inherited from his father, and when the young bloods of the village wanted a new or Sunday suit they could get a ready-made one from a choice of patterns at Robert Addis's shop.

The staple meat of the village was pork and the fact that there might not be an 'r' in the month made no difference whatever, except that a housewife would have difficulty in

hot weather in keeping a joint from going bad. One practice was to de-bone it and put it in a meat-safe and suspend it by a rope just over the water of a deep well. Pork could be bought at one of the village shops, but usually a man would buy a whole or half quarter when a neighbour killed a pig and, if he had a sty of his own, would similarly transfer a portion when his own pig was killed. It was a habit years ago to allude to Norfolk labourers as Norfolk Dumplings, but what Norfolk dumplings were I have rarely found one who knew, though most thought them to be those soggy masses of dough that are boiled with a stew. But this is a Norfolk dumpling and here is the recipe. It is a man's recipe and given in a man's way, with no finnickin' references to exact tablespoons of this and teaspoons of that.

RECIPE

Make enough pudding crust which when shaped would make a circle of six inches diameter, but with the crust there should be incorporated somewhere about a dessert-spoonful of finely grated raw onion. The filling is lean and fat pork cut into small dice and with it is also incorporated raw onion to taste, together with salt and pepper. The pudding is then put in the usual cloth and boiled the requisite time.

To-day, of course, you would make that pudding in a basin and it may not be till the end of the war that you will be able to make it at all. But I will tell you this, that when that pudding is cut open there pervades the room an aroma that would make a dead man turn in his grave, sit up, and find himself drooling at the mouth.

But the labourer took that pudding to work, and cold. With his shut-knife he divided it and one half would be his breakfast and the rest his dinner. With it, or instead of it, he might have what was known as a thumb-bit, which would be a huge slab of bread on which, held down by the thumb while he ate, would be a slice of cold pork or cheese, and he would cut alternate pieces of bread or meat and convey them to his mouth with the end of his knife. Even to-day I have no special use for sandwiches; it is the thumb-bit that I prefer.

In almost every village kitchen there would be a huge salt pot in which pork was kept. But not only the accredited joints were eaten. Head and trimmings would be boiled down to make pork cheese, as we called it, though you may

know it as brawn. The small guts would be scraped for use as sausage skins and the stomach and the larger guts were a delicacy. They were known as 'pigs' bellies', but I will not give you a recipe, for whether your stomach be queasy or not, it would turn long before the dish was ready for the table. For the belly and guts, smoking hot from the animal, would first have to be emptied, and then twice every day for a week the wife would turn them inside out and wash in fresh water, and in summer the stench would be indescribable. But by the end of the week there would be no trace of smell, and when they were boiled their flesh, if I may so call it, would be white as the breast of a chicken and tender enough to be eaten with a fork. Vegetables, as I have said, were plentiful and superbly grown. Most cottages had very large gardens and there were also in the village various allotments. Farm-house butter cost from tenpence to a shilling a pound, but it was pork dripping that was largely eaten. Even to-day I prefer it to any butter in the world, and you can take this, if you like, for another recipe. Roast a piece of fat loin and in the pan put a very little water in which is some grated raw onion. When the dish is cold you will find there both dripping and jelly and both should be spread on bread with a little salt and pepper.

Skimmed milk, which is what the village generally used, was amazingly cheap, and before morning school you could see the children with their milk cans going to the farms to fetch it. The new milk had been put into great flat earthenware pans and when the cream had been removed from them, the residue was sold. A whole canful of three or four pints would rarely cost more than a halfpenny. Eggs were never more than one penny each and at Easter, when they were plentiful, they were a halfpenny.

Cottages were generally pitifully small, and the ceilings were almost always little more than six foot in height. There would be a small living-room and a kitchen-scuttery, and lucky was the housewife who possessed a pantry. Most cottages had only two bedrooms and since families were large there was tremendous overcrowding, and in my youth there were many deaths from tuberculosis; consumption, or galloping consumption, as we called it. Cottages with one bedroom would be allotted to a widow or an old couple, and the very large families had cottages accordingly. In the case of Sam

Smith, William Cash's coalman, that was necessary for he had a family of sixteen. Kerridge, who was a farmer, however, could beat that record with a family of seventeen. Sanitation was of the most primitive kind. My father remembered rails across an open ditch, but in my young time most cottages had closets, communal ones for a pair or group, at the far end of the garden, and these consisted of a kind of movable framework over an enormous excavation known as a bumby-hole. When these holes were full to the top, or when closets, as very often, were within a few feet of the back door, it took a good many moss roses to counteract the smell. Nearly every cottage had its individual well and it is a curious fact that when a man did away with himself, from weakness of brain perhaps or dread of the workhouse, it was by jumping into the well that he would finish his days.

The labourer or small farmer had one rather unique insurance against unexpected disasters. If, for instance, a cow died or a horse or a labourer's pig, or fire destroyed his tools and gear, there would be circulated through the village what was known as a Brief. This would be a sheet of stout paper on which the Reverend would write the particular claim for consideration and charity, and he would usually head the subscription list with a guinea at the least. Then the Brief would be taken round the village and each would contribute according to his means. Even as late as just after the last war I remember a Brief. It was on behalf of Sam Smith, and an extraordinary case it was. His father was very old and somewhat weak in his wits, and so Sam, whose family had grown up and gone, took him into his cottage. Now Sam, thanks perhaps to the contributions of his children, had been something of a saving man and hidden under a brick by the fireplace was a bundle of notes. These the old man one day found and thinking them of no consequence threw them into the fire. In that particular affair it was difficult to gauge the amount of one's subscription, since a good few of the uncharitable insisted that Sam had exaggerated the amount of his loss.

The Breckland labourer has changed little, except perhaps in his dress, from Cobbett's time. In most things he remains what his fathers were some hundreds of years ago. My present tense, of course, relates to fifty years ago, and even then

most of the village names were Biblical. I can think of practically no worthy after whom Heathley was not called, and there was a Caleb, a Noah or two, Enochs and Abels and nearly every prophet. Among the women were Ruths, Naomis, and there was even a Kerenhappuch, who with her sisters Kezia and Jemima, completed the daughters of Job. Much of our language, too, had a Biblical flavour. In the frail-basket of her husband a woman packed not his food but his victuals and we would talk of eating a morsel of food.

The chief characteristic of the labourer was that he was slow-moving in thought and action. We have an expression which exactly indicates the speed at which a man generally moved. We do not say, 'I saw old George comin along,' but, 'I saw old George drawin along.' There is an excellent story told of one of our labourers of whom a certain man asked the time. The labourer was driving a tumbrel—tumbler as we call it—in which was a rather restive horse, and he pulled up to answer the question. As he had no watch he looked about him for a minute or two at the sun and the natural signs, and then in a drawling voice delivered himself of this.

'The time? Well, that sorta, kinda, fare¹ to me as though that might be drawin along toward half arter—whoa, old hoss!—fower!

To my way of thinking, too, the old-time labourer was something of the Gascon of England, for among his fellows he was apt to be boastful. I remember particularly old Hammond who would attend the cricket matches when his son Ernie—which we pronounced Arnie—was playing, and all the time he would be moving about the spectators and his remarks would be something like this.

'Bast! Can't that boy Arnie hit!' or, 'Darn it! Did you ever see anyone bowl like that boy Arnie?'

As for his work, a labourer, then as now, was expected to be the master of most things, though there were some who were noted as being specialists in some particular job. There were good stackers who could build a round or a gable-ended stack with walls and roofs symmetrical as if made to measure, and there were men who were skilful at horses and had rough veterinary knowledge. There was Long Harry Jessop, so called from his height and leanness, who was a most notable

pitcher. He would wield a special pitching-fork and one sheaf at a time would not content him and, when a stranger was looking on, his way of boastfulness would be to rear three sheaves—shoofs, we called them—at a time, or a monstrous heap of barley that would sag the handle of the fork when he lifted it high above his head to a full load. And there was little Jack Carman who was a wonderful wielder of a scythe, and above all on grassland. I myself have mown much barley, but grass, especially when thin and scere, was always beyond me. But Jack with his scythe could cut the trickiest low meadow and leave it as though it had been a lawn-mower that he had used. There was John Lister, too, of the wood-yard who was a marvellous man with the adze. I remember once we needed two huge oak beams clapped together to carry a roof and the join had to be so close as to be held together almost by suction. John Lister took these two beams, gnarled, roughened, and warped with years of drying, and worked at them with his adze and at the end you would have thought they had been fashioned with the finest of planes and polished with sandpaper.

The first man I remember working for us was known as Willo. He was youngish and rather slim and I do not know if the name was a nickname which should be spelt willow, or if it were a friendly form of Will. But Willo was undoubtedly a slow mover. My father would say that to be sure he was moving at all one had to get him into line with some immovable object like a building or stack. One day when his slowness was particularly exasperating my father said to him: 'Willo, have you ever sin a hodmedod?'¹

'Why, yes, master,' said Willo mildly.

'Then you must have met it,' said my father, 'for you darn well never overtook it.'

The end of Willo was an amusing one. One day he was even more slow than usual and my father went storming across to where he was at work.

'Willo,' he demanded, 'h'ain't you got a different strook² from that?'

'Why, yes, master,' said Willo.

'Why don't you use it then?'

'Because I dussent,' said Willo.

'Dussent?' said my father, and stared. 'Why dussent ye?'

¹ Snail.

² Stroke or pace.

‘Cos that’s a darned sight slower’n this,’ said Willo.

My father, always a man of quick temper, sacked him on the spot and gave him his money. A few weeks later we heard that Willo had gone up to London to be a policeman!

I love that retort of Willo’s and the unsuspected valour that prompted it. It reminds me, too, of another man who had been stubbing thistles for a rather high-handed farmer. It was the time of the war between the Greeks and the Turks, and in William Cash’s bay window on a Friday night one could see the newspapers with their drawings of desperate and sanguinary battles. Now this particular labourer was something of a slow mover like Willo and none too thorough in his work.

‘Master poor job you’re makin on’t,’ stormed the farmer. ‘Look at all them thistles you’ve left.’

‘I don’t know, master,’ said the man. ‘It’d be a rare sharp battle, wouldn’t it, if all on ’em was to get killed?’

Another notable character who worked for us in my very early youth was Dodger Lake. He was a very short man and fiery-faced, and all day long he chewed tobacco. Of the village’s dozen or so consistent drunkards, Dodger was the most regular. I remember one day my father and Dodger and myself were driving home in the evening from some job of work in a neighbouring village and we came to a pub.

‘Think I’ll be gettin off here, master,’ Dodger said.

‘Please yourself,’ said my father, and pulled up the horse.

‘Suppose you couldn’t let me have a shillin?’ asked Dodger.

‘I certainly can’t,’ my father told him, for he was a teetotaler and non-smoker. ‘I’m lending you no shillin to spend on beer.’

On we drove and Dodger was left behind with a prodigious thirst and never a penny in his pocket. But a few minutes later there was a tremendous noise in the garden of the pub, where Dodger had let out a sow and her litter from the sty. Out rushed the landlord to see Dodger trying to get both sow and litter back.

‘Lend me a hand,’ he hollered to the landlord. ‘Someone went and left this here door open, and if I hadn’t happened to be comin by, every darn thing in this here garden would have been et.’

Together they got the animals back and Dodger was warmly thanked.

'Better come in and have a drink,' the landlord said. 'I don't know about you, but I could do with a pint.'

'And so could I,' said Dodger. 'And I don't know that I couldn't manage a quart.'

Those were the days of signing the pledge and the Blue Ribbon Army. One of my earliest and vaguest recollections is being on a platform somewhere in London with my aunt and reciting a poem of which the only line that I remember is, 'Drink, pretty creature, drink'. And in Heathley, as I have said, there were at least a dozen incurable drunkards who would be found lying in ditches and under hedges on a Sunday morning or after a Flower Show or a Whitsuntide parade of the Friendly Societies, for beer was cheap enough then and reasonably potent.

One Whitsuntide evening I had business that took me by the Mound and there in front of the *Lion* were two of our notorious drunkards, stripped to the waist, and fighting, and round them a ring of spectators. I remember one man had a bloody nose and there was blood on his hairy chest. I was fascinated and perhaps because I had been reading Borrow, and the famous fight of The Flaming Tinman, so I edged my way in to watch. But someone had fetched George Dew, who was village constable, and that office might be regarded as civilian assistant to the regular policeman. Old George, a timorous man at heart, came hobbling along with his game leg and the spectators drew back.

'What's going on here, together?' demanded George.

But the blood of the combatants was up and there was no answer.

'You'll hatta stop it, together,' hollered George, and was backing away out of the reach of the wild swings. And then, as no one took the least notice: 'All right then, together. Fare to me as though you'll hatta look arter yerselves.' And with that off George went and the fight proceeded.

Though I can recall almost every man and the farm at which he worked, except for such men as my father employed we had little personal contact with the village labourers, except to hear that this one perhaps was on the Club, or that that one had been drunk, or had had an increase in family; but when the weather was wet our great barn would be a general meeting-place for such men of the village who were

disinclined to drink or had no available money to spend at the pub. 'Send it down, David!' would be the cry as they looked up at the rain, for rain meant rest and it was their wives who knew that it also meant less money. In the barn then my father would talk politics in his own vivid and personal way, though his listeners would comment by no more than grunts or monosyllables, afraid as ever to commit themselves. The younger and more lusty among them would tell bawdy stories of the cruder type, and then my father would hustle me off. But I never heard him check a man for the looseness of his tongue unless his language was unnecessarily foul. I think his aim was to get men to talk and be at ease and in the mood to listen to himself.

But there was one character among the men of the village who deserved at least to be called unusual. On the farms were great flocks of sheep, and this particular man—a man to me though I doubt if he were much more than twenty—was a shepherd and in charge of twenty-score ewes on the Plains. As my travels that way were generally in summer I saw him at his best, and never did I so envy a man or see a country that so resembled the Delectable Mountains. When I came to read *As You Like It*, there was Corin and the fells of the ewes and the rough surgery of sheep, for I would often help this young shepherd with his tar-pot in the season of maggots. In return he lent me books, that is if you can call Penny Dreadfuls books, for he had the most tremendous collection of Buffalo Bills and similar titles that I have ever seen. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, and I devoured them every one. One I particularly remember was about—of all things!—the Mogul Conquest of India, and it was the only one which my mother caught me reading and which she immediately confiscated in spite of my protestations that it was doing me good.

But this shepherd was also a magnificent performer on the tin whistle. He had a special whistle that was made of brass and I imagined that the melodious and intricate sounds he produced were due to some virtue of the whistle itself, for he told me it had cost sixpence. I, already a humble performer on the penny tin whistle, was at once agog to own this magic instrument, and when I had saved the necessary sum I did become its owner.

Then all my leisure was spent in practising, and at last I was

capable of a rendering of 'God Save the Queen', of which I was rather proud, and I decided to give a display before an audience more sophisticated than my sisters.

On a Friday night as I have said there would be a crowd before the bay window of William Cash and looking at the gays, which would generally be the lurid pictures on the pink pages of the *Police News*. There was my audience and on a certain Friday evening I put in an appearance. It was no ostentatious appearance, however, but as if by pure chance I happened to be that way and by chance the whistle had found its way to my lips. With my ear cocked for the comments of the listeners I began my set piece. Before I had got through half a dozen notes the first comment came, and it was the last I stayed to hear.

'Darn them boys!' said a woman to her neighbour. 'They oughtn't to be allowed to make them there noises!'

The labourer lived hard, worked hard, and died hard, and he generally died in harness. When he ceased to work, and often that was not till after his eightieth year, he depended on the charity of his children. Failing them, and if he could still earn an odd shilling here and there, he might live on by Parish Relief. Failing that there was nothing but the Workhouse, and that was a something to be feared more than death itself. I remember how my mother would be saddened when news came that this one or that was going to the Workhouse, or that some old woman could no longer look after herself, or her cottage was needed, maybe, and she was going to the Infirmary.

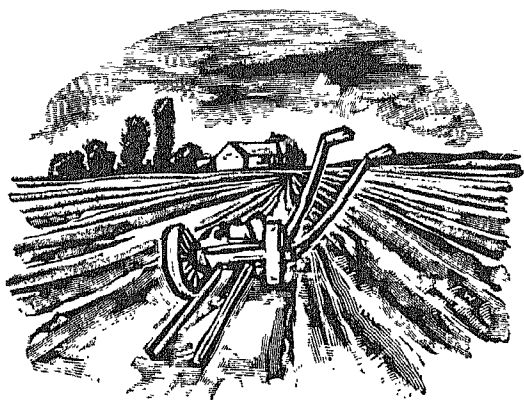
It was that surgical, spiritual operation of separation from the village which was most deadly to those who were taken to Workhouse or Infirmary, for thereafter they rarely lived long. All their days Heathley had been their life, and even their visits to Hareborough or Ouseland could have been counted on the fingers of a hand. What the men seemed most to dread was the bath they would be given on arrival, and one man—George Rewell, brother of the Cranberry farmer and of Aaron—fought and kicked with his last strength when they began to strip him.

But if the labourer died in the village it was in the village that his coffin was made and of good Heathley oak lined with cotton wool and with a sawdust-filled cushion for head rest.

Four of his fellow members of his Club—six if he were a heavy man—would carry him on their shoulders all the way from his house to the church, and by the coffin would walk two boys carrying the coffin stools, so that at intervals the coffin could be set down by the roadside and the men could rest. Then John Pardon would bury him, and by the following Sunday his mound would be turfed. Somehow his relatives would manage the erection of a simple head-stone and as simple a lettering, in a few years to be obscured by moss and lichen.

Rarely was there an epitaph though occasionally a brief text. But one epitaph I remember, and that was spoken by my father when he heard of the death of Jack Carman.

‘So little old Jack have gone!’ he said, and shook his head and sighed. ‘Never was one like him, and never will be, for mowin them low meadows.’





Chapter VII

THE LABOURER AND THE LAND—*continued*

THE land of Heathley, as of all the Breckland hamlets, was light, which was perhaps why the bracken could so easily work its insidious way. Pick up a handful of our soil in dry weather and it would slip through your fingers before you could examine it. After rain the flints would be clean and visible which was doubtless why men would cling to the old belief that stones actually grew. When a high wind rose on a cultivated breck the air would be thick with the fine soil and when it subsided the stones would again lie clear. Women and children would be paid a pittance to collect them in pails and dump them on the headlands, and from there they would be carted to the roadsides and used for rough metalling. What Heathley envied were the heavy lands that began just beyond it to the east; lands whose rich clay loam lay deep and whose poorest of crops—except perhaps at Hill Farm—was as good as the pick of our own.

Our farming system was based on the four crop rotation often known as the Norfolk—roots, barley, layer, and wheat. Each farm had its meadows known often as the Home Meadows, since they were near the farm itself. But ours was not pasture country and, considering the size of farms, few cows were kept. And it was rarely that even one of these home meadows received much dung even when it was up for hay. A personal experience may demonstrate the extent to which these meadows were gradually becoming impoverished.

When I was a young man I wished to increase the size of my garden, plant a young orchard, and make a bowling green

for village use, and so I took in an acre of the meadow that lay at the garden end. There was little levelling to do, but when my gardener saw the fine turfy nature of the turned soil he begged me to allow him to use a good-sized strip for the growing of some special potatoes. Meanwhile the bowling green had been made and at its far end was a large summer-house, Norfolk reed-thatched. At each side of this and along both sides of the bowling green was to be a herbaceous border: a vast border, twelve foot wide with hollyhocks and delphiniums towering at the back, and the whole sloping down to front edgings of things like pinks and aubrietia. My friends gave me hundreds of plants and I bought hundreds more, and by the end of April everything was planted as designed.

I was away then for some three months and all the time I would be thinking of that border of mine and longing to see it. At last the day came, and as soon as the car was in the garage I almost sprinted to the new bowling green. And what I saw was beyond belief. Here and there things like lupins that are indifferent to soil were straggly or bushy, but the rest were a collection of dwarf-like weeds. There were delphiniums, eighteen inches high and in full bloom, and the hollyhocks were grotesque miniatures of no more than two foot. As for the potatoes, when they were dug there was not one that was much larger than a marble.

Something drastic had evidently to be done. Early the following spring every plant was taken up and well beneath it was put a slab of rich juicy pig-muck. That summer the hollyhocks were fifteen feet high and the delphiniums had flowering stalks that were over three foot. A year later my old friend Jack Fitt, head gardener at Brackford Hall and the raiser of the famous Brackford montbretias, did me the honour of assuring me that it was the finest herbaceous border that he had ever seen in his life, and the only one that could beat even the pictures on the gardening catalogues.

What saved our Heathley farmers in the matter of pasture was the possession of what we called low meadows, though the adjective 'rough' is rather more apt. But they were generally low and sloping towards small brooks or marshes, and many of them were studded with gorse. These made excellent grazing for hungry cattle and for horses too; if they were capable of being mown. We farmed one such meadow and it was long in shape with one end high and the other

swampy. When it was up for hay so scanty was the crop at one end that it was a waste of time to go over it with a grass machine, but the other end was too thick for the machine and had to be mopped out with scythes. The horses would graze it, and I can still see them on a hot August afternoon in the scanty shade of trees, hips sagging, heads tossing, tails swishing and a hind leg stamping against the pestering flies.

As to our land generally there was a saying that it required two showers weekly—one of rain and one of shit—and I make no apology for the word. Indeed, the finest dung I know is that from bumby-holes. The method was this. When the holes were so full as to make the use of a closet virtually impossible they would be emptied in the dead of a moonlight night by a man who came round with a contraption on wheels and a large ladle. By the roadside there would have been dumped a tumbler of dry loam, and this would have been opened out like a basin. Into that the contents of the bumby-hole were tipped and the earth shovelled over, and even the following morning there would be never a trace of smell. In a few days the earth would have absorbed the muck and the whole heap could then be carted away.

At Lammas Meadows, as poor a holding as any in the parish was one piece of ground that was amenable to no kind of manuring. Then my father acquired half a dozen very large bumby-holes and their contents were spread in the mangold baulks and then ploughed in. I have done much spreadin' o' muck—as we call muck-spreading—in my time and the smell of dung is sweet to my nostrils; but I confess that that particular spreading of fifty years ago was somewhat too much for me. But four months later the beet on that land were touching each other, and never in my life have I seen leaves so rich a green. What was more you could tell to a single beet where the bumby-hole muck ended and other manure began. And yet within ten years we were to have in Heathley an agent who assured us that the carting of dung to fields was not an economic proposition.

Quicks, as we called twitch or spear-grass, flourished in the light soil and in spring it would be dragged out with harrows and gathered into heaps and burnt on the land. That was one of the first signs of spring and a kind of beginning of the farmers' year, and there would be no missing it since the fires would be everywhere and the wind would blow their

smoke across the village. My father, and there he was a pupil of old Wyatt of whom we shall later hear much, would get both barley and first beet in at the very beginning of April for he claimed then that we were sure of rains that would encourage young growth. In any case the next big event would be the chopping out, and the long lines of men moving across the fields with their hoes. Next would come the sound of the huge grindstone in George Dew's yard, for there the men would be sharpening their scythes against the haysel, and there would be an adjusting of handles and men balancing their scythes with the tip of the blade against the toe of a boot. Then when haysel was over the village seemed to give a deep breath and relax somewhat till harvest. But hedges would be trimmed and dry ditches cleared and the rubbish carted off to make stack bottoms.

Harvest was the grand climacteric of the Heathley year, but as it is something with which you are probably as familiar as myself I will dwell only on what are perhaps some unknown customs of fifty years ago, though among them may be some that are not unfamiliar. The producers of the Authorized Version used the speech of their time, and I have already said that Heathley in many ways had changed little in those hundreds of years. The Bible speaks of the Lord of the Harvest and we also had our lords. Nowadays perhaps they would be called foremen or headmen, but it was as lords that we knew them, and a lord would be chosen by the men themselves to be their leader and spokesman. When men mowed it was he who led and it was he who enforced the payment of fines for the breaking of the few simple and necessary rules.

A man, for instance, mowing behind another, would keep the length of a scythe from the other's heels and if he came nearer might be fined a half-gallon. When the lord considered the time had come for a drink it was he who would call a halt and pour the beer out in the single mug and hand it to each man in turn, and it was he who took note of what beer was bought and collected each man's share of the cost. It was with him that the master or steward dealt, and in all matters of dispute the decision of the lord was final. The old custom of largesse still prevailed, though it was not so strong as in my father's young days. I remember that whenever a stranger set foot on the harvest field there would be a cry of, 'Largessel' or, 'You'll hatta give us a largessel' That

largesse or gift—and we pronounce it with the accent on the first syllable—would be a half-gallon or gallon according to the means and amenability of the stranger. The same fines were imposed when anyone used or even handled another man's scythe or tool, and sometimes such a tool would be left lying as a cunning invitation.

I am not quite sure if I remember, but if not, I only just missed the last of the parades that were made through the village on the day that a harvest on a farm was concluded. Then a wagon, or wagons, and the horses would be decorated with boughs and the men would drive slowly through the village, hollering, 'Largessel!' and so collect money for a feast of their own.

The best time of the harvest day was that known as Fourses. Breakfast would have been snatched in the early hours and often at dinner there would be a halt of little more than half an hour, and then the lord would be getting to his feet. Fourses was vastly different. Mothers and the smaller children would bring cans of hot tea, and cut bread and butter and homely cakes, and whole families would sit together in the lee of a hedge or stack selected by the lord. It was a happy, laughing time that I shall never forget, and even when the lord gave the signal to start work again the women would sit on and the children would be in the hedges looking for nuts and early blackberries, and the girls would be braiding stalks of wheat and making little golden crowns in imitation of those that were always put on the far top of a round thatched stack.

Two of the things which we ate at Fourses were shortcakes and apple-cakes, and since you probably know them as well as I, there is no need to give recipes. All I will say is that the apple-cakes were made in a kind of enamelled soup-plate and consisted of spiced and sweetened apple in a double layer of crust, and this cake would be cut in slices and handed round. I should say, too, that everything was communal. An unmarried man would be given tea and whatever there was to spare would be shared. As for the shortcakes, as we called them, they were simply this, and to my taste there is nothing to beat them: flaky pastry sprinkled abundantly with currants and sugar, and then baked. In the baking the sugar would melt and somehow permeate the pastry and when the cake was eaten there would still be the pleasure of a lick at sticky fingers.

But if Fourses was the most restful moment, the most exciting was the chasing of rabbits. Word would flash round the village that So-and-so was cutting the Ten or Twelve or Twenty Acres, and if all went well it would be down by, say, 6 o'clock. Throughout the day news of the progress of the cutting would reach our ears and when only about two acres remained to be cut every man, boy, and even girl, would gather round that last patch of corn; and each armed with a stick that was not only a striking weapon but also handy for throwing. But woe to the boy who threw stone or stock into the standing corn, for a keeper would be there to see that it was not a young pheasant that was struck. And we all hated the keepers because they made us stand far back.

Then as that strip of corn inexorably narrowed, the rabbits would begin to run; an odd one or two at first, and finally almost a flock. The lord or the master would be calling, 'Holler, boys, holler!' and there would be such a din that a bewildered rabbit would not know which way to turn among the shocks.¹ In any case its speed was slow for the stubble pricked its belly, and it was only rarely and when perhaps a score of rabbits bolted at a time that a single rabbit would slip through the cordon and reach the safety of ditch or hedge. I have known two hundred rabbits killed in an eight-acre field, and as many as twenty rabbits dug from a single hole in the middle of a cornfield where they had taken refuge. But what I remember most is the long din of that desperate hour. We would be working perhaps at Lammas Meadows and yet as far as two miles away we would hear the hollering of boys and all the clamour of that mad pursuit.

When the last ear of corn was cut all the rabbits would be collected and laid out in rows. The men would assemble under the lord, and then the lord himself would walk along the rows and choose the rabbits he needed, a pair or two pairs it might be of young bucks. Then he would call each man's name in turn and that man would similarly choose, and next would come the employed youths and finally the lads. After that would come the turn of everyone who had helped in the killing, and generally there would be not a boy, or girl but would go home with a pair of rabbits. And I will say of both our heath and corn rabbits that they were the finest I ever knew, with kidneys covered with fat, and flesh white and

¹ Sheaves of corn put together for convenience of carting.

about it never a taint of that rabbit odour which one discerned only too easily in the rabbits of the city, so often imported from Ostend.

I have said that my own first share of harvest work was to pull a drag-rake and it was work that I hated, for not only was it continuous but the teeth of the rake would always be catching in weeds and layer. But I was soon promoted as assistant to the man who served the thatcher, and of all the scents of harvest there is none that so brings back my youth as the scent of clean white straw.

When a stack was to be thatched the necessary wheat straw would be dumped down by it and a filled water-cart. Then the heap of straw would be spread by cunning twists of the fork that scattered it in all directions and then with the same cunning twist of the wrist pails of water would be thrown and so on with straw and water till a heap of sufficient size was made. Then, and it was something I always hated for it would make for hard pulling, the man would mount the heap and tread it firmly down.

At earliest dawn the thatching would begin. The great thatching ladder would be hoisted to the stack and there would be the thatcher with his stake against which the shoof would rest, his rake for smoothing the thatch, his broaches or serrated hazel stakes for holding it down and his tar-rope that would be tied along the stakes as additional security. If he were a man who took a pride in his work he would have also a pair of shears for trimming the thatch eaves. My task would be to pull out the straw and leave it by my right leg in long rows. Then the man would flick it with his fingers with a crude sort of combing till he had what was called a yelm, which would be enough for him to pick up and place in the flails. These were hazel rods that would be fastened with a leather thong and about four to six of the yelms would make the shoof. When from the thatcher came the cry of 'Shoof!' the man would hoist the shoof to his back and mount the ladder, and the thatcher would dexterously remove the shoof and whisk it into place behind the special stake. But if there were a cry for broaches or water or tar-rope, it would be my job to carry them up to the thatcher, but in spite of that there was abundant time for rest, especially if the man and I could contrive to get a shoof or two in hand. Dodger Lake was our first assistant. I remember that in such periods

of rest he would spit out his old quid and gnaw another from his bar of twist, or he would put his bottle of drink to his mouth and take a long swig, and then settle again to his chewing.

Immediately a field was cleared of rakings the gleaners would appear, and I remember them as old women in cotton bonnets and frocks, and to me they always seemed to be stooping to the ground like Bunyan's man with the muck-rake—though with more worthy an object. Even before the gleaners had gone the keepers would come and all over the field would be stuck branches of thorn. This was to guard against the dragging of nets at night for the poaching of partridges. Almost at once too, the threshing gear would be abroad, and when it returned to the village at night a man would be ahead of the engine and carrying a red flag. Mothers would call their young children indoors, for a few years before, one of Dodger Lake's boys had been run over by that engine, and with the memory of that in their minds there was no need for the children to be called twice.

Last of all would come the hawkies. They would be held in the evening in the barns of the farms and whole families would be present except the youngest children. After the meal there would be a homely concert with music provided by an accordion, and men would sing old songs and each man his own peculiar song which no man but himself would ever sing. Moeran has collected many of them, but the only two I remember were the property of one man, and their titles were *The Spotted Cow* and *Yonder Shine the Moon*. Harvest sales I have already mentioned. A horse and cart would come in from Hareborough or Ouseland and a man from one of their shops would distribute bills with the date of their sales and the bargains to be had. But Robert Addis was always too clever for them. He would make the date of his own sale accordingly and his prices also, and it was he that did the bulk of the trade.

I have said that among the men who worked on our land there were no outstanding personalities, and in a sense that is true, for Wyatt—I give him his real name—was not a labourer but the steward under Green at Hill Farm. Of all those who made a profit or lost money on our poor soils he was the man with the finest knowledge of his craft, and of all our characters he was in many ways the most eccentric.

He was elderly when I first knew him; his shoulders somewhat bowed but possessed of an enormous vitality, and his tanned face so furrowed with weather as to show the hand of God in open carving. His clothes were those of his father: the low-brimmed hat, coat reaching almost to the knees and with immense buttons and pockets, and breeches to match and cloth leggings. He always carried a stick but not for elegance of walk or idle swishing, for at each step he would thrust it furiously to the ground and his walk had something of the same fury. That is how I see him, tramping across his fields or seated in his ancient sulky with eyes that roved insistently and almost glaringly around.

If he caught sight of something that displeased him he would spring from his cart, leave the pony to itself and with a continual hollering of, 'Blast yel' he would make for the offender; and then he would rage and storm and stamp that stick of his into the ground and threaten immediate dismissal. If it were a gang of harvesters he would threaten to sack the lot, and only when his fury had expended itself would he return to his cart, still growling and muttering and with the same vicious thrusting of his stick. An hour later perhaps he would draw mildly up again in his old pony cart and would say gently and offhandedly, 'Thowt ye might do with a drink, together.' And at the back of the cart would be one of those wicker jars that held perhaps five gallons.

His men knew him and respected him and when he stormed and raged no man would utter a word. Sometimes he would have arguments with my father and then I would be terrified. But my father would always laugh and chuckle and that would make the old man even more furious, and yet somehow they always parted as friends. The boys who minded bullocks in the Low Meadows feared him worse than the devil himself, for if he caught them away from their charges he would lay about their buttocks with his stick. For laziness he had an expression which I have never heard elsewhere, for he called it the light o'pin fever, and I can even now arrive at neither its origin nor meaning. Methodists he held in particular scorn. Once, when I was with my father and we met him, I happened to be suffering from the gripes, which we usually knew as growing pains. Old Wyatt laughed scornfully when he heard that.

'Blast the Methodists and all the ranterin lot of yel' was

what he hollered. 'When you're dead and cut open, what'll there be inside of ye? Nothin but sweetmeats and chocolate.'

As to his way of farming it was simply this. In the Low Meadows would be scores and scores of young rangey bullocks and in autumn those that were of a size would be brought into the numerous barns and bullock sheds, each of which had its own dung-yard. There would be employed continually at each a man and boy who would spend their days in cutting chaff and chopping up mangolds and swedes, and only in the early spring would the bullocks be fed with additional cake to put on their last fat. But meanwhile they would be daily dunged out and the dung piled till the yards were veritable mountains, and in spring all that dung would go back to the land, or in autumn if needed for winter wheat. And not only did the land profit from that perpetual influx of humus but there was also the money from the sale of the fat bullocks and they had cost nothing except the wages of boys and men and the cost of the cake.

I will leave his farming at that and there is only one more thing I will relate of him and that is an episode in which I myself was concerned. I trust you will find no ostentation in my perhaps too frequent mentionings that in the matter of education I was more advanced and fortunate than my fellows, on which account perhaps I had a reputation for rare and precocious wisdom. But at any rate a certain thatcher who had finished harvest called at our house and asked if I might go with him to do his measuring up, and off we set in his pony-cart. I was about nine years old and I had provided myself with note-book and pencil, and he had a long stick to the end of which was fastened a piece of batten a yard long with which he would reach up and measure round the eaves. The system of payment was roughly this. Thatching was taking work and at eightpence a yard for an ordinary man and ninepence for one considered especially good. But only half the distance round the eaves was allowed to count, so one measured all round and then divided by two, and that was why round stacks were so popular with thatchers, and avoided by farmers.

Well, we reached the rendezvous and there was Wyatt waiting for us. His face was red for he had been drinking, and the first words he uttered were, 'What have you come for?'

The thatcher, who knew him well enough, duly reminded

him but the old man was in one of his obstinate moods and told him to get off the farm. I was frightened, but in a moment or two Wyatt was saying that even though he might consent to accompany us in the cart and witness the measuring up it would be only a waste of time for he hadn't the faintest intention of paying.

The melancholy procedure began and we moved from stack to stack. The thatcher measured and I made notes in my book, and all the time I was ready to burst into tears for the old man would be storming and raging and stamping with that stick of his and swearing that never a penny should we get out of him. Then, after a miserable two hours, the long business was over and we had finished at the main stack-yard which was at the farm itself. Wyatt got out of the cart.

'Fare ye well, together,' was all he said, and off he stamped towards the house.

'Don't you worry about him, Master Michael,' the thatcher told me in a whisper and we sat on in the cart. And sure enough, and at the door of the farmhouse, the old man turned back.

'You'd better come in, together, and have a drink,' he called, and out of the cart we got. I remember the huge farmhouse kitchen and how he poured the man a mug of beer and how his ancient lip curled when I refused my mug. Then when the drink was finished he remarked in a voice that had never been more mild, 'How much do you make it, boy?' and, 'Reckon I'd better pay ye, together.'

Then from one of his vast pockets out came his hessian bag and I can still see the sovereigns as he placed them one by one on the clean whiteness of the kitchen table.

Wyatt has long since gone and the generation of labourers with him. Even the horse is something of a rarity and as it ousted the oxen which I only faintly remember, so machinery has ousted the old plough and the scythe. Maybe modern agriculturists are right and Wyatt was wrong: I am prejudiced and, concerned though I am, it is not for me to say. But this I do know. No scattering of artificial manures can put body into our light soils, and empty bullock sheds make empty stack-yards.

I am at heart a simple man and there are things which I find it hard to express, but as I see it, in all contemplation of

the past and assessment of values there is an evocation and an answering of the spiritual part of us to dim tradition which no mechanized profit or economic exigency can wholly remove or still. To regret the past for the mere sake of that past is foolishness maybe, but to regret the good in the past is surely a kind of goodness in itself.

I remember a morning when I was no more than nine years old. There was an errand my father wished me to do at a hamlet beyond Shopleigh, and he and I were up before dawn and while I had my breakfast he put Grey Jack in the sulky and then I set off. After some miles my way led by a field known as the Hundred Acres and as I came to it by a slight rise I let the pony walk. It was a superb morning of early August and as I came to the height of land and looked across the great field I saw a something I shall never forget. In the near distance at least a score of men were mowing barley, the lord at their head. There was the faint swish as the scythes met the standing corn and the steady, ceaseless rhythm of arms and bodies and scythes in unison. Each man was spaced regularly behind the man ahead and the young sun would catch the gleaming scythes as they swung, and in the labour of those score of men was an incredible beauty and an energy as of some relentless purpose.

Since then I have seen most of the great orchestras of the world. I have seen the bows of the strings move in unison and yet I have been only momentarily stirred. For the unison and the rhythm have always recalled to me a something beyond the magic of music and the superbity of man's skill and the discipline of a baton. What I think of is a small boy in a pony-cart and the dew on the barley and the swing of those scythes in that Hundred Acre field.





Chapter VIII

THE METHODISTS

IF I have seemed partial in the matter of Radicalism it is because I still feel that its Heathley adherents fought under its banner in a just cause, and there is condonation of the bias in the fact that to-day the principles for which they fought have long been accepted by all but the most die-hard and parochial of Conservatives. But in the matter of Methodism I am not partial, brought up though I was in village Methodism, and a Methodism of that personal Evangelical kind that gave to its followers the name of Ranters. Now, in my beginning Autumn, I am of no religious body or sect and therefore hold no brief. All I do is recall as faithfully as I can the Methodism and the Methodists of my early youth. And without belittlement of others, I see them now as the veritable salt of our village earth.

Nor do I balance Church against Chapel, as we knew ourselves, though it might be as well to view our differences through my eyes as soon as I became old enough—and that was well before my teens—to ponder the problem and feel its impacts. The Church then, as I saw it, was a kind of superior form of worship and the peculiar property of those with power and money and of those immediately dependent on them. There was something infinitely grand and romantically aloof about it—the ancient building, the rich and sonorous music of its organ, the Reverend in his scarlet hood and vestments, the voice of the Clerk echoing among the pillars and the solemn quietude of its congregation in prayer. There

were also things that were incomprehensible and which set it therefore farther apart so that somehow it was a wholly different God we were worshipping. The ritual, for instance, was too involved to follow, and when I went to church I had to watch warily to know when to rise, sit, or kneel. It was a long time before I knew what people did or meant when the Psalms were sung, and if the Reverend intoned the prayers and collects his voice became that of a stranger and I could follow never a word.

There were also fierce envyings and jealousies. We youthful Methodists were aware of a humility and yet contrived somehow to take a challenging pride in it. It was a fact, however, that at the Christmas treat which Green gave each year at the Hall, Church children received infinitely better gifts from the tree than did we, and that by arrangement between the housekeeper and Mary Balfour. Their Sunday School treat was held either on the Park or at Little Heathley; ours was on some chance meadow. On the other hand we had one tremendous satisfaction. For the tea, we said, they had bread and rhubarb jam! Why we should so have scorned rhubarb jam I do not know. Maybe it was boiled sweetened rhubarb we meant, for rhubarb jam with ginger and lemon is the jam of an epicure.

Those hostile to us would sneeringly refer to us as Ranters, as I have said, and in a way they had cause, for compared with their rule-of-thumb, impersonal worship, ours was both noisy and self-expressive. To them it must have been a form of exhibitionism. For the Methodist went to his chapel to take an active personal part, and he was indeed a part and in that House an equal with any, and it was his freely given pence or shillings that had built it and continued to maintain it. Whatever the quality of his voice he sang, and lustily. He needed no comfortable framework of a prayer book as a manual of direction for intercourse between himself and his Maker. His preachers prayed as their hearts directed and at Prayer Meetings he would make his own personal petitions. If in a sermon the preacher struck some chord that seemed to demand from himself an answering note, he would utter a hearty, 'Amen!' or, 'Praise the Lord!' Methodism, in fact, was religion of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Methodism, like John Bunyan, suffered no compromises, and the issues were clear-cut. A man fled from the City of

Destruction with a great burden upon his back and there was no entry to that strait and narrow and dangerous path but by a little wicket gate. It was the heaven of Revelations to which that road led, and hell was a place of burning, terrifying fire. To the Methodists that wicket gate was to be 'saved' or, as we generally said, converted, which was a casting off of the old Adam and putting on the new. To be converted was no simple act of assertion; it was to me, in my boyhood, some miraculous transformation, some flash from the Infinite like that which struck down Saul of Tarsus and made him into Paul. Often when a preacher depicted the terrors of hell and in the imminence of death the urgency of conversion, I would quake with fear and at night would tremble in my bed. More than once, but always at night, I would go to some lonely place and there shut my eyes tightly and pray with the words of my mind that I might be vouchsafed that transformation which would magically free me from the horrors of hell. Though nothing happened, yet there was in the act itself a certain secret satisfaction, and by morning and until the next sermon on damnation, both hell and heaven would be forgotten. But heaven, truth to tell, was never an attraction. Streets of gold and pearly gates and the playing of harps had singularly little significance.

But the test of all religion is surely simple. On the highest Authority we have it that to gain eternal life one must first love God and then one's neighbour as one's self. To test a man in the former would be difficult enough, but the second is the test and touchstone. And of the Methodists I will say this. Among them were hypocrites and Pharisees, but the overwhelming bulk were what men called 'good living' and in their very faces was a kindliness. Men trusted their word. They were, as we put it, respected. They were the good neighbours. I have seen it written that a Victorian village without Methodism was a loaf with no yeast. It would be equally true to say, an orchard with no bees.

Ouseland, which was eight miles away by the inferior road, was the headquarters of our special community or Circuit. It is a venerable town and, indeed, should be called city, for before the See was transferred to Norwich it had its cathedral, and Stigand, who crowned Norman William, was one of its bishops. Its Grammar School may be regarded as having a

somewhat broken history of at least a thousand years, and the older part of the building is venerable indeed. And in case you may not have understood the complete lack of class distinction in our little school at Heathley, I should tell you that in Ouseland precisely the same conditions prevailed. Public Schools were unknown to us, and to the Grammar School went the sons of lawyers, doctors, prosperous merchants and the smaller gentry, together with such nondescripts as myself. In Ouseland, too, were the chapels of many sects. The paid minister of our sect lived there, and his assistant, always a younger man, was at Harford, for as the Circuit comprised at least two hundred square miles such a separation made for ease of supervision. But it was rarely more than once every quarter that a minister would visit us. The bulk of our preachers were local.

Once a quarter there would arrive at our house what was known as the Plan, and at once it would be pinned up like a calendar. It was a kind of programme and on its list of local preachers would be read the names of any newcomers. When a man became a preacher we would say he was on the Plan. There would be given also the quota of contributions which Heathley, among other villages, had to make to the general upkeep of the whole Circuit. The maintenance of its own chapel—repairs, redecoration, oil, firing, and innumerable replacements—were under its own control, and for them it arranged its own collections. Somehow there always seemed to be a collection and that was a standing joke among those who were not Ranters. In the village it was a kind of catchphrase and when a man had finished with something or it was time to go home, he would say, 'Well, I reckon it's about time we took up the collection'. But the most interesting thing about a Plan was that it announced our preachers for a whole three months.

My mother had been a member of a famous City chapel and had sat under Spurgeon and heard all the giants of Non-conformity, and it was no wonder that at times, and loyal though she was, she found our village Methodism somewhat trying. But her own belief was both clear and implicit and I would give much, even at this day, to have so steadfast a faith. I recall an occasion when, having acquired from somewhere the rudiments of astronomy, I rushed to her with the information that the Bible must be wrong. By no conceivable

circumstance could Joshua have halted the sun in its course. Never shall I forget the scarifying look she gave me and the verbal dressing down. If that was what books and schooling did for me, the sooner I was removed from both the better.

But it was my mother's comments on the Plan that I remember, rather than my father's. She was a woman of more nurtured upbringing and, compared with us, sophisticated, and for the life of her she could never help a sigh and a comment when she read the list of the preachers for that coming three months.

It is curious and tragically ironic that religious snobbism—and we are a nation of snobs—should find it convenient to forget that the Son of Man was a carpenter and the Apostles men of the homeliest callings. Our local preachers were of the same social strata as the Apostles, and ourselves. There were labourers among them, tradesmen and farmers and, indeed, the list on our Plan was a cross-section of Breckland life, shorn of squires and professions. Among them were men whose hands I should be proud to shake to-day: men of simple lives, fervent faith and unobtrusive goodness. They were not men of religion but of Christianity, and the cornerstone of their creed was the Sermon on the Mount.

There was Doran—I cannot remember his Christian name—who kept a little shop by the market-place at Ouseland. He was an old man when I first saw him and he had the face of a Hebrew prophet and his words were uttered and heard as if indeed they were prophetic inspiration. His famous sermons would often be repeated by request, and two of them I remember well. One was of that great image that Nebuchadnezzar saw in a vision: the image whose head was of fine gold, its breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, legs of iron and feet part of iron and part of clay.

The other had as theme our individual responsibility for the sufferings and death of the Man of Calvary, and as he led us along the Dolorous Way, it was we, somehow, who were carrying that heavy Cross. It was our hands and feet that were pierced, and we who hung and agonized and thirsted. Then we would be the thieves that hung with Him and the centurion who all at once discerned a new god on a new Olympus, and we heard the crash of a dreadful earthquake and saw the heavens darken. For when Doran preached, we indeed were there when they crucified our Lord. If we had

known that negro hymn I am sure we should have sung it, but what we would sing when that awe-inspiring sermon ended was,

‘When I survey the wondrous Cross’

and to the grand old tune of Rockingham.

My mother’s face would light up at the coming of Doran and of Charles Loveday. He was a carpenter like his Master; a tall man with a grizzled beard, and merely to see him was to witness the truth of his own perpetual claim that gloom and depression were alien to the Christian. What I remember principally about him, besides his abounding joy, was at the end of an evening service which he had conducted. Even before he left the pulpit people would be calling, ‘Brother, you’ll hatta sing us the Trumpeter.’ He would shake his head and smile and say that he had a long journey before him and the hour was late. But we knew what would happen and would rise in our seats as he passed down the humble aisle and turned towards the door. There he would turn and would burst into song. His voice was a fine baritone and the tune, famous in Methodism, had the quality of a bugle call.

‘Hark, listen to the Trumpeter,
He calls for volunteers.
On Zion’s bright and shining mount
How glorious He appears!’

Then there was Charlie Clark of Barnham, and I give all these worthies their own names. He was famous for his humour, which was both unforced and homely, and had in it such a quality of unexpectedness and indeed such a subtlety, that if one’s attention wavered for a moment, it was likely to be missed. We children loved to hear that he was coming, for it was at our house that he always had tea, and after that tea it was with us he would joke and talk. And there was Barney Jarrett, a prosperous farmer and a man of no pride or pretence. But my mother would frown slightly when she saw his name, for Barney, as big a man as ever I saw, was a son of Boanerges. And I think he was aware of the fact for at first in his sermon he would roar gently as any sucking dove, and then in his fervour he would slowly forget himself and his voice would rise. Soon the whole building would be filled and the very windows would shake, and when his mighty fist thumped the desk or even the sacred Book,

we would draw back instinctively as if the whole rostrum must collapse on our heads. But he was a magnificent preacher and though after one of his sermons my mother would always claim to have a headache, she would never forget to add that the service had done her good.

Of Rudd of Harford I have said much in *In This Valley*, where he was one of the several characters who formed the composite one of Abner Webster, but perhaps I may be allowed some repetition for he was so notable a man that a whole chapter could never exhaust him. He was an indifferent preacher but one who in daily life had the respect and affection of every man with whom he came into contact, and when my mother would smile at the sight of his name on the Plan, we all knew why.

In the pulpit he was an awe-inspiring figure, for if he also looked like a prophet, it was of the maddest and most fanatical kind. His yellowish beard came well down his chest and the hair of his head was so long and wild that in his moments of fervour it would fall across his eyes and almost obscure his face and he would be brushing it back with a hand. I had not been in Heathley more than a week or two before I heard him preach. By ill chance his text happened to be

Unto what will ye liken Me?

And he repeated it. I had the answer ready and in a whisper only too audible, said to my brother, 'The Wild Man of Borneo!' For that I received from my father a due reward.

But the description was curiously apt. And he had the queer trick of letting his voice sink to little more than a whisper and then with upward sweeps of his arms bringing it to a tremendous crescendo and, as he did it so often, his voice had the quality of incantation. But the great thing about him was his gift in anti-climax.

On a certain Sunday Rudd arrived in the place of another preacher and duly made his explanation from the pulpit.

'Well, friends, I expect you wonder to see me here instead of Brother Barker. The fact is his wife is sick and they asked me to take his place. So here I am this afternoon while he stay at home by the bedside of one whom he love—*no doubt.*'

My mother actually tittered at that and I have often heard her recall it. And there was another famous occasion when he

was talking of the heavenly bodies and the great works of the Lord.

'When I look up at the heavens,' he said, 'and behold all these marvellous works, those wonderful words of the inspired poet always come into my mind.' He paused for a moment, struck an attitude, and then—

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are?"

And there was another occasion when my mother did not laugh and that was when Rudd began his first prayer with some special information for his Maker, namely: 'The sun to-day, O Lord, is warm but the wind is chilly.'

'As if the Lord didn't know that,' said my mother, with a sniff.

But there was at least one name at which my mother would always shake her head and him we will call Holley. He came from Hareborough and even my father would admit that he was a botty¹ man. He was certainly a man of promiscuous reading and his opening gambit—"Now you won't know this, together, but I can tell you . . ."—would always infuriate my mother. What he knew might be how many miles the earth was from the sun or the number of stars then conjectured to be in the Milky Way, but whatever it was, the snippet of information was imparted with an infuriating air of omniscience and self-importance. Moreover in his prayers he would always allude to himself as 'Thy unworthy dust,' and in that my mother saw merely an aggravation of the offence.

Then there were the beginners, or even probationers, who would be tongue-tied and stammering and incoherent. My mother would sigh at the sight of their names, but my father would say somewhat angrily, 'Everyone's got to make a start at some time, haven't they?' 'I know,' my mother would say resignedly and with a shrug of the shoulders.

One such beginner I remember well. He was talking about salvation and then was suddenly gravelled for lack of matter. There was an awkward silence while he stood with mouth agape and striving desperately to find new words. Then something came and he blurted it out before relapsing into another silence.

'None o' them sinners what I've been tellin you about want

¹ Stuck-up.

Salvation. They're like a sick dorg with a bone. They won't h'et!¹

The homeliness of that imagery was far from my mother's taste and I can almost see her moue of disgust.

There were occasions when it was impossible to find a substitute for a preacher who could not fulfil his obligations, and on such an afternoon we would sit patiently waiting and hoping that the preacher was merely late. Our own senior steward was a local preacher and therefore generally away, and it would fall to the lot of Josh Till to step into the breach. There would be the shuffle of his feet on the floor and then he would get to his feet and make his slow way to the pulpit, for he was a man of no eloquence whatever and was always at a loss for words. But something had to be said and at once, and Josh's face would turn an even more vivid red and he would begin to perspire, for like George Spline he was what was known as a very moist man. I remember once that he pulled out his huge red handkerchief and mopped his face and then began with: 'Well, I don't know how you get along, together, but I hully sweat!'

But Josh was a good-living man, as I have said, and much could be forgiven him; indeed the more I think of those stalwarts of my boyhood the greater is my respect. Most of them worked long hours each day and every day of a week and the Sabbath was their only leisure. If then they gave that rare leisure up, it was for the Cause and the faith that was in them, for there was never a penny of monetary reward unless one so assesses a free tea and a welcome. I recall one story in that context of a certain local preacher who came to Heathley for the first time. Now usually the preachers would have their tea at the house of the senior steward, who was Robert Grinter, the baker, as fine and as unobtrusive a man as my boyhood knew. But there would be preachers with particular friends in the village, and then they would go elsewhere, as Charlie Clark, for instance, would come to us, but it so happened that on that particular Sunday everyone thought that somebody else had invited the preacher to tea, and the consequence was that the man had no tea at all. On his next appearance in Heathley chapel, when he hung his hat and coat on the peg at the back of the pulpit he also hung up a knotted handkerchief, and during the sermon, and in order

¹ Have it .

to reinforce some particular point, he said that something was sure: 'As sure as that's my tea in that there handkercher.'

But there were other sacrifices that those Sundays involved. Most men would walk, even if it were ten miles each way, to the chapel in which they were to preach and that meant the giving up of a hot Sunday dinner. So conscientious were they that only the very old and those incapable of walking would hire a horse, for that would involve a horse-hire collection. Yet even in the dead of winter they would never shorten their evening services and would even prolong them in a half-hour's prayer-meeting. To be faced then by a long walk across our lonely and open heaths was something I should not have cared to contemplate, especially when the wind was high and bitter and heavy with rain or sleet. Often my father or some other man would put his horse in the cart and drive the preacher some miles on his way. But if it were his own pony that the preacher drove, the prospect would not have been much more pleasant, though mercifully in those days there was no tarring of roads and those ways across the great heaths would have a certain whiteness even on the blackest night. But those were the days of cart-lamps lighted by guttering candles and the beam they threw was scarcely enough to make visible the ears of the plodding pony.

And there is one small thing which I particularly remember, how that those men who had sacrificed so much would always contribute to each of the Sunday's collections. Indeed on one occasion I remember when Robert Addis, who was a man of extreme shyness as we shall hear, had taken up the collection and was actually opening the far door to the Sunday School where the proceeds would be counted, when a mild voice from the pulpit suddenly halted him.

'Hi, Brother Addis! H'ain't you forgotten me?'

I have said that we are a nation of snobs and it is a thesis which I am perfectly willing to maintain, and even at this moment when some of our avowed peace aims are to level class distinction and to make opportunity for all. I know a village in which the son of the parson must still be called Master John, and not so long ago this urchin of nine years reprimanded a village man who addressed him simply as John. In the somewhat exclusive Club to which I happen to belong I chanced the other day to utter some defence

of Lord Nuffield. An elderly member—son of a country parson—leaned forward and asked me in a tone of pained reproof if I was aware of the fact that William Morris had once kept a little cycle shop at Oxford. I have been asked if the tie was I wearing *stood for something* or was merely a necktie. Quite recently, too, a man who had heard of me as a cricketer asked me *for whom* I had played. In an impish moment I told him Heathley, and while he was doubtless trying to puzzle out the connection between that unknown club and the Free Foresters or the I.Z., I made a quick exit.

This may seem to you a wholly unnecessary digression and in the worst possible taste. But what I would say is that every generation has had its particular form of snobbery. Some years ago there was tennis at my house and among the guests were the then Vicar of Heathley and his wife. Staying with us was one of my sisters and her son, now a most excellent fellow and in the Indian Army. Tea was laid in the front of that reed-thatched summer-house which I have mentioned, and young Peter—then the same age as when I returned to Heathley—took a look at the table and then remarked with consternation and disgust, ‘What! only one kind of cake!’

‘Young fellow,’ I said, ‘when I was your age I saw a cake only once a week and that was on a Sunday. As a matter of fact I had it only once a fortnight because your Granny liked seed-cake and I didn’t. A little dose of the same treatment wouldn’t do you any harm at all.’

When tennis was over and the guests had departed my sister sought me out and the danger signal was flying on her cheeks. Why had I seen fit to let the whole family down? To blurt out, and so crudely, about our youth and giving the Vicarage the impression that we had not been brought up but dragged up? I am afraid I was wholly unrepentant and added fuel to the flames by mentioning the rock from which we were hewn and the pit whence we were dug. I am afraid too that she never quite forgave me, and I sincerely trust that the story of our lamentable upbringing never reached the ears of her butler.

But what I have been leading to is this, that for us children Sunday was not only a day of rest and gladness but also our one day of what might be called good living. It actually began for us on the Saturday and two of my duties on a Saturday afternoon were to sweep the yard and the purlieus of the

house and to clean, and with the old-fashioned stick blacking, the Sunday boots of my sisters and myself. If the cobblestones were grass-grown, I had to clean them out with an old knife, which would take me a whole day, and there would be special injunctions from my mother that I was on no account to dig up her special shamrock. And though we had no regular pocket-money, sweets would be bought on a Saturday night by my mother for distribution the next day. Then in the early evening the great copper in the kitchen would be lighted and there would follow a succession of baths. When we woke in the morning, clean underclothes would be by our beds and our Sunday suits or frocks.

But because of those clothes there would be no work for me; no bullocks or pigs to feed, though I might have to prepare a bowl of bread and milk for the ferrets or mix a pail of barley-meal and scrap-cake for the dog or dogs. Then would come the excitement of breakfast, for there was always a special treat. A third of a bloater, it might be, or half a kipper, or half a sausage, or even half an egg. If you wonder how that operation was performed, then boil an egg till it is neither soft nor hard and use a sharp knife and whisk the halves quickly into egg-cups.

Then came a long period of reading or just sitting still until almost half-past ten, which was time for Sunday School. I always loved those mornings, for Robert Addis was my teacher. After a hymn and a prayer we boys would read with him the stories of the Old Testament, and by way of occasional variation one of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Year in and year out we would read them, each taking a turn aloud, and they never returned except with a new wonder. Had I my way I would print those stories straight from the Authorized Version and make of them a book which should be compulsory in every school. So much did they hold me, and indeed thrill me, that during sermons when a preacher was tiring to listen to, I would read them surreptitiously, though I knew most by heart. It is a sad comment on this age that such nobility of thought and incomparable glory of language should be comparatively unknown. Maybe the statement is too sweeping, even by comparison with my generation, but I have had talk with young people, and supposedly of considerable education, who had never heard of Gideon and Caleb and Jonathan, or Jezebel, or Rhoda, or

the Shunammite woman. Endor and Gilboa meant nothing, or that great testing on the slopes of Carmel.

It would be well before twelve when Sunday School was over and then a walk was permitted. Almost always it would be to Brackford brook where there was much to see; a swarm of stickle-backs perhaps, or a flock of ducks disappearing beneath a bridge and reappearing on the other side. If it were spring and there was watercress, we would gather some for tea, and if it were summer we would pluck down the hanging honeysuckle and take a bunch home for our mother. Then it would be time for dinner, which was always a hot one, and there would be a special pudding or pie. After that would be another period of reading or quiet, for my father would take a nap in the best room, and in summer I would always wonder why it was that he slept with a handkerchief across his face.

We will make this a winter afternoon; a dry cold day when there will be an early moon. When half-past two drew near my father would make his way to chapel leaving my mother to follow with us children, for he was a quick, impatient walker and hated our dawdling progress. As for the sermon, that would be quiet and even academic, and as a kind of warming up for the evening, which was the climax of the day. When service was over there would be a quick look round outside. Old friends might have been tempted by the evening moon and have walked in from Brackford, or Wortley or far out on the heaths. Invitations would be given to tea and we children would love to hear my father say, with his boisterous laugh, 'I won't hear a word on't. You're certainly not goin home. We aren't so hard up that we can't find a morsel o' somethin.' Then while the visitors walked home with our parents, we would go for another walk. This time it might be round Stile Meadow or Parliament, but we would always be home early, for the elder girls would have to help with the tea, and tea on Sundays was a notable meal.

I have mentioned cake, and how on alternate Sundays my mother would have a seed-cake. Sometimes there would even be short-cakes as well, but there would always be huge plates of thin bread and butter and things to eat with it. In spring that would be watercress, and in summer lettuce or cucumber. In winter it would be hearts of celery for the elders and the outer sticks for ourselves. And never shall I

forget that Sunday tea when we first tasted jelly. It was a raspberry jelly turned out from a mould and we were warned that it was a special treat.

'No golpin,'¹ my father warned us, and his dialect was a mark of good temper. 'You'll hatta make it last.' We were each given about a dessert-spoonful and we took the tiniest taste. Then we gazed at each other with more than a wild surmise, and straightway each eye was on a plate and we lingered out that incredibly delicious thing till finally we had to be enjoined that unless we hurried up there would be no time for cake.

¹ Gulping down quickly.





Chapter IX

THE METHODISTS—*continued*

AT last would come the time for the evening service. Across Stile Meadow would be the sound of Heathley's single church bell and while it rang there was no special haste. My father, as a steward, would go first and if it happened to be very dark we would take a lantern. But George Spline would be the first to arrive, and he would see the lamps were trimmed and filled and the stove was heaped with coal and cinders. Robert Addis would be early too, and his seat was at the far back of the room. The Homes would file into their pew which was almost underneath the pulpit, and by their walk and numbers we could tell each person or family that entered. There would be the Kerridges who filled two whole pews, but what I always waited for was the entry of Josh Till. He and his wife would enter their pew and I would see them out of the corner of my eye. Josh would bow his head in prayer and utter an amen. But he would not lift his head. While it was still bowed he would give a hawking and a clearing of his throat and at last a monstrous gob would fall to the floor and this he would scrape politely with his boot. My mother would always give a shudder.

The preacher would enter and take his place in the pulpit, and if he were some notable man, word would have gone round the village and at the very last moment in would come 'them chaps', though they were Church to a man. Robert Addis would show them into pews around the now red-hot stove and then the chapel would be full. On the wall above

that stove was a clock to which the preacher's eye would occasionally lift, and as soon as it was half-past six he would get to his feet.

'Let us worship God by singing to His praise Hymn number one hundred and two.'

Then he would read the first verse, and the other verses in turn if the words were unfamiliar. Then the harmonium would play the tune. A second, and there would be a spontaneous outburst of voices. Another evening service had begun.

After that hymn would come the prayer and it might take well over five minutes, for it was comprehensive. It mentioned saints and sinners; the absent, sick and dying; the weather even and it always included 'them chaps'. It would plead for the Divine Presence, and the redemption of the promise that where two or three were gathered together in His name, there would He be in the midst. Almost always, too, it would end with a mention of the Judgment and the prayer that on that dreadful day we all might be sheep, and at His right hand.

For that evening service there would be what we called a Sankey, which would be a familiar hymn from the collection of the American evangelists. That was the time for mothers to suckle their babies and get them to sleep, and if a baby subsequently cried, the mother would take it out till it was quiet, and then return. And after that hymn would come the one Bible reading, and the chapter would generally include the text. The older worshippers would know then that one of the famous and requested sermons was coming and at its ending there would be a stir of anticipation. Then would come another hymn, and the great moment was at hand.

A sermon of three-quarters of an hour may seem long, but to us it was only too short. To a man like the inspired Doran it was barely time enough to insinuate himself into his text, and sometimes a preacher would give a reluctant glance at the clock, and say that he ought to conclude, for the hour was late.

'No, no!' would come the cries; and, 'Go on, brother: Go on!'

When the sermon was over there would be a last hymn, and then all eyes would be on the preacher. If he knelt in prayer, then the service was almost at an end. If he gave a quick look over the congregation, then we knew there

would be a prayer-meeting, and, sure enough, he would be calling on this brother or that to lead us in prayer.

I say it in no fltering or flippant spirit, but there were few of the prayers that we children did not know by heart. Ted Large—the kindest of men—would pray for ‘our tribes and families’ and by the former it was hinted that he meant the Kerridges. Robert Grinter would always conclude: ‘May we be gathered unbroken families at Thy right hand. The Lord grant it for Jesus’ sake. Amen.’ Grandfather Crawford had a wonderful prayer but uttered in short bursts, and in contrast to the slow delivery of John Lister. But it was the prayer of Josh Till that would never fail to interest and we children would sometimes giggle, and then my father would growl something and scowl, and in both was the threat of punishment.

Josh spoke at tremendous speed, with occasional pauses for as quick a breath. To you his opening words would have sounded like this.

‘Lord-thank-thee-wear-war-what-war . . . Here-means-grace-hope-glory . . . Not-cryin-them-vold- har-past-sum-mended-not-saved . . . here-wuh-vation-still-be-had.’

But that, as we Methodists heard it, was this.

‘Lord, we thank Thee for where we are and what we are. We are here at the means of grace, and with the hope of Glory. We are not crying like them of old, “The harvest is past and the summer ended and we are not saved”, but are here where Salvation is still to be had.’

Those words are music. They have a natural nobility, and they came from the mouth of a humble man who earned as humble a living by the sale of fish and cucumbers and things like oranges and samphire. Years of repetition had given them a patina, and that they were uttered splutteringly and like shots from the new Maxim gun was no matter. The Lord doubtless accommodated His hearing to their speed.

My father would pray and at once I would feel self-conscious and shamefaced. I do not know why children should so often feel a shame in whatever public performance it may be of their parents, but I know I would always keep my head closely bowed. My father’s opening words never varied.

‘Gracious and eternal Father,’ he would begin, but of the rest I remember nothing, for he was one of those rare few

who changed his petition to the needs of the moment. But during those prayers a fervour would slowly descend on the worshippers. Some of the modern wise would call it mass hysteria, but all I know is that even a small boy like myself would feel a something which the simple might deem a Presence.

Perhaps some whisper of the Ghost
Fluttered a breeze of Pentecost.

But, as I say, I do not know. But there would be fervent cries of 'Amen!' and old Crawford's quick 'Amy! Amy!' and a, 'Praise the Lord!' Someone would break into a familiar hymn and at once the whole congregation would be singing. But when at last the preacher himself prayed, the meeting would be almost over, but on the faces of the worshippers when they rose would be a something new.

The preacher would come down from the pulpit and in his progress along the aisle would shake hands with this one and that. As he neared the door there would be cries of, 'Good night to you, brother,' or, 'God bless you, brother. Mind you come and see us again soon.' Some brother might break into, 'God be with you till we meet again,' and with that music in his ears he would be off to put in his nag, or it might be the nag of some other Methodist who had promised to drive him a few miles on the homeward way. The rest of us would linger for a last word with neighbours and friends, and so out to a shrewd wind maybe, and a clear moon.

But late as was the hour, that day of days was for us children not yet over. In my first year my youngest sister was a baby and Granny Shaw would come in to mind her while my mother attended evening service, and as we all loved Granny, we would talk with her till my father came in from the stables. The youngest children would then be in bed and we others would have communal singing, with my sister or my mother as accompanist. Hymns, it might be, or something from our book of anthems, but whatever it was we would all take our various parts. My father had a fine baritone, and my mother and eldest sister clear sopranos. Another sister had a deep contralto, and I, who had the singing voice of a corncrake, would take from my earliest years an attenuated bass. But thanks to the music lessons of my sisters we children could all read music, and nothing somehow mattered, for we were

together, and we were singing, and it was long past the time for bed. And then at last the order would come.

But even then there was a ritual.

'May we have a piece to eat, mother?'

'Certainly not,' my mother would say. 'Look at the time. You ought to have been in bed an hour ago.' And then in almost the same breath. 'It will have to be very little then and you'll have to hurry up.'

There would be a short-cake perhaps, or even a tiny helping of cold apple-pie. But whatever it was we still lingered it out. And so at long last, to bed, and in a matter of moments we would be asleep. But in the morning we should come back, and in more ways than one, to solid earth again. For breakfast thick slabs of bread and butter or dripping. For dinner plates piled with vegetables and gravy, but in mid-week rarely a taste of meat, unless it were rabbit. For tea bread and jam or bread and butter, but never bread and butter and jam. Even to-day I feel a twinge of conscience when I put jam on buttered bread, and to put butter on the bread which I eat with cold meat would be unthinkable.

Of our few hypocrites I will say little. Most of us are too concerned about our own shortcomings to play the Pharisee in the faults of others. But I will say that among us was the chief of the village gossips, who every morning would make the round of the parish. There was a certain jobbing builder too, who when given the job of building a greenhouse in a neighbouring village managed to convey home each night sufficient of the glass to build in due course as good a greenhouse for himself. There was a certain chapel steward, a *Mr. Talkative*, who on one certain occasion was pleading for funds and suggested that if each member of the congregation put in the box a penny for every blessing throughout the year, then that box would be more than filled. The contribution which he himself slipped in was observed to be a half-penny.

There was also one at whose name you must guess, but often my father would need some special piece of timber. To get it would have meant a journey to a town, and it would have had to be paid for. Yet he usually contrived to get such pieces and I often wondered from where, for I knew he had never been to any distant wood-yard. Then one day he

told me to go to the roan mare's stable and see if there was a special piece of timber in a corner under the manger. There was, and planed and shaped. I saw, too, what I had never noticed before, that match-boarding had been cut away and there was a communicating hole with a shed belonging to the Squire's wood-yard. But it takes all sorts to make a world, and he would be a bold man who would venture to say who is and is not of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I trust I have not left you with the impression that it was only on Sundays that the vital sap stirred in Methodist veins. Often on a week-day a minister would come and there would be an evening service or prayer-meeting. But it is of the two great Sundays of Methodism that I would like to say more.

The Sunday School Anniversary fell in the heat of summer, but it began for us children at least a month before, and I even remember learning a 'piece', as a recitation was called, while I was minding horses on the wide verge by the Gravel Pit. It must have been a triumph to have fitted every scholar, and without repetition from a previous year, with a piece or a part in a dialogue, and when my mother would discover a new poem in one of the religious periodicals that she would read there was something of the thrill of finding a precious stone.

The length of the recitation that was handed to a scholar depended not on age but on the proven ability to commit to memory and retain. Perhaps our most noted performer was young Tom Francis, of whom we shall hear more later, and he would deliver himself of poems of perfectly staggering length. The only effort of my own that I remember is *Billy's Rose* by George R. Sims, and I remember only the first line—

Billy's dead and gone to glory, so is Billy's sister Nell.

The dialogues we hated, for there was no story in them and they would sound precisely like those doctrinal conversations with which Christian and his fellow pilgrims would enliven their walks. For the Anniversary, too, there would be special hymns which it would take weeks to commit to memory, and when the great day at last came there would be all the tension and excitement of a theatrical first night.

On the Saturday night my father and another steward or two would build a platform that rested on the front pews and went all round the pulpit to the north wall and there would

be steps from the aisle by which we could mount. Sunday morning would witness something of a full-dress rehearsal on that platform and each child would be given an appointed place. Then at last the great moment of the year had come. There would be no boy without his button-hole, and I remember my sisters would have new frocks and new hats. As for the platform, that would be jammed tight with us, girls on one side and boys on the other, and the chapel would be so crowded that forms would be placed down the aisle and there would be an overflow into the Sunday School, the door to which would be left open. Even Bradford Billy would come to chapel on that one Sunday of the year.

The one who always 'took', as we called it, those anniversary services was Reeve of Garboldisham. He was a well-to-do farmer and butcher with a young family of his own, and his swarthy face and jet-black beard revealed some strain of gypsy that I have always heard was in him, but it is his eyes that I remember most, for they were the kindest and the most twinkling that I have ever seen in a human face. And as master of ceremonies over those concerts—for that is what they really were, if strictly religious in nature—he stood head and shoulders above every man in the Circuit. Even the most stammering and much-prompted of our efforts would receive its word of praise and if the performance were really an excellent one he would express the feeling of the congregation by a regret that in that sacred building there could be no applause. Even those stilted and ultra-pious dialogues would receive a commendation, and indeed they were vastly to the taste of so unsophisticated an audience.

For the boys, at least, the method of reciting was this. The scared youngster would stand in his position on the very front of the platform with his body in a state of extreme rigidity and his eyes glued on the clock at the far end of the room: not that he was anxious about the time but it made a mental something to which he could cling. The three laws of elocution as once propounded by William Reeve himself were, first, to speak clearly, secondly, to speak clearly, and thirdly, to speak clearly, and that is what the uncomfortable urchin would doubtless be remembering while his gaze was fixed on the face of that clock. But the happiest results always came from some tiny girl or boy, for they lacked all self-consciousness and actually enjoyed a public appearance.

In the intervals of recitations the children would rise and sing one of their special hymns, but it would be wrong to call that a breaking of the monotony for that huge and tightly packed congregation would perspire and enjoy.

Often it would not be till nearly half-past four when the afternoon service was over and on that day there was scarcely a Methodist cottage but had its visitor to tea. At half-past six the second service would begin and it was for that that every tit-bit of recitation and dialogue was reserved. Even the porch would be crammed at night and it would take at least four stewards to make their way round for the taking up of the collection. That collection was the final and in some ways the greatest thrill of all the long day. Reeve would state the multitudinous needs for money and would end with his yearly reminder that Heathley had always beaten a previous year's total. Then he would consult a paper on which he had jotted down the amount of the afternoon collection and announce that so much was needed if a record was to be made.

I have accepted the claim that Methodism was the yeast of a village loaf, and now I will say this. In the congregation would be scores of church-goers and 'them chaps', and while the stewards were counting that evening collection they would feel an excitement as great as our own. Indeed, when Reeve would regretfully announce that we were ten shillings short and then look round the congregation invitingly, both Church and Chapel hands would go up and a steward would collect their additional sixpences or shillings. Then at the very end Reeve would always put his own hand in his pocket and slip into the box what was always known to be a five shilling piece, and no sooner would a new record be announced than the whole audience would break into, 'Praise God from Whom all blessings flow!'

But when the excitement of that Anniversary Sunday had gone there would still be the Sunday School Treat and that would be held on the following Wednesday. Kerridge would lend two of his wagons and horses which would be decorated with green boughs and flowers and then we would be driven not only through the village but to distant farms on the outskirts of other villages, and the wagons would halt from time to time while we would sing one of those special hymns. It would be almost five o'clock when at last we got back to the Sunday School where tea would be waiting. That was

no charge upon the Sunday's collection for Robert Grinter would give the bread, Robert Addis the tea and sugar, Kerridge the butter, and the women would make the cakes and bring their crockery in the large two-handled linen baskets. When tea was over we would adjourn to Kerridge's meadow where there would be games like 'Jolly Miller' for the younger ones and cricket for the boys and races for all. Then lastly, and when dusk was in the sky, we would all be looking for the reappearance of Robert Addis, for he would bring a huge bag in which were packets of sweets, and there would be nuts for which the boys would scramble.

The second great day of the Methodist year fell also in mid-summer and it was known as Camp Meeting Sunday. The original body of Methodists loved those meetings in the open air which would often last for days, but the Conference set its face against them. On that account the Primitive Methodists, which was the official name of the Ranters, seceded from the main body and formed a society of their own. It was in celebration of that secession and establishment that a village like Heathley would have its Camp Meeting.

Again it would be Kerridge who would supply the wagon which would be used as pulpit and the services would be held on his meadow. For that great occasion one of the Ministers would always come and with him would be at least two other stalwarts, usually men with loud, clear voices like Charles Loveday or Barney Jarrett, and only the old and noted hymns of Methodism would be sung. For us children a Camp Meeting was noteworthy chiefly for the fact that we sat or lay sprawled on the grass while listening to the sermons.

But at six o'clock in the evening the Methodists would assemble on the Mound, and it was then, I think, that the Church really saw us as Ranters. For there would be a short open-air service with people watching shyly from their cottage doors. Then a preacher would issue an invitation for all to join us and we would form up in procession and march to Camp Meeting meadow to the music of some stirring hymn.

It may be thought that too much emphasis has been placed on the lowly social status of village Methodists of fifty years ago, and their consciousness of it, but it did produce among

them the communal strength and much of that interdependence and mutual support that prevailed among such bodies as the Quakers. But in my very earliest years I witnessed a rearing of the Heathley head. It was a significant and even a historic moment.

I remember that it was a warm afternoon of early summer. Just before the collection was taken the senior steward rose and said he had an announcement to make, and in his voice was a curious excitement. He was holding a handbill which he read to us, how that the Heathley Methodists were asked to support a Sale of Work that was being held in a nearby village. *That Sale of Work was to be opened by a Methodist who was also a magistrate.* Small as I was I felt the thrill and I too would look at that bill when it was placed in Robert Grinter's window and stare at the magic letters J.P. I have forgotten the exact words that Robert Grinter used that afternoon but I know they had a new dignity and were something like this, that it was a great day for village Methodism when it knew that among its active members was a man of the standing of a magistrate.

But within two years Heathley was to have its own triumph, and a greater. A large sum of money was needed for redecoration and long-needed improvements, including an American organ to replace the ancient harmonium, and it was decided to have a Bazaar. A meeting was held for the purpose, *inter alia*, of deciding who should be asked to open this bazaar, and then at the very end of that meeting Peacock threw the bombshell.

'Well, you needn't worry any more, together,' he told us dryly, 'for I can tell you who's comin. Our Member—that's who's comin!'

That was a sensation throughout all Breckland Methodism for Sir Frederick did come and with him was Miss Walton, his niece, and what was more he gave five pounds to the funds. Two things I clearly recall about that great day: that my father—personally well known to Sir Frederick—introduced me to the great man, and that Miss Walton not only opened, as it were, the new organ but sang a something which few of us had ever heard—a song called *Killarney*.

For me there was rather an amusing sequel. Many years later my Regiment happened to be stationed near Sir Frederick's house in Suffolk and he issued a standing invitation for the

officers to play tennis and billiards. I was often there, and I remember one winter night when I was the only caller. The three of us had played billiards and then sat and talked, and Miss Walton remarked that if there had been a fourth we could have played bridge.

'Why don't you sing to us!' I said, for there was a piano in the room.

'Sing!' she said, and I can hear her laugh. 'I never sang in my life.'

'Would you like to bet me a pair of gloves that I haven't heard you sing, and before an audience?'

'That wouldn't be a bet,' she said. 'That would be just taking your money.'

'I don't know,' I said, and then proceeded to explain. Then she laughed and Sir Frederick laughed, for it was the only occasion on which she had ever sung at all.

Sir Frederick remembered well that Bazaar and my father, though not the small boy who had been introduced to him, and yet I knew it made a warming of the heart when he learned that little of my history. He confirmed, too, what my father had told me a good many years before—that Heathley was a stronghold of Liberalism. He also added with a reminiscent shake of the head, that that identifying of himself with Heathley Methodism was perhaps the shrewdest move he had ever made in the matter of propaganda.

There are many stories I could relate of village Methodists and Methodism, and it is with something of preliminary apology that I tell the story of the Evangelist, for it strikes a deeper note. The truth of it came to me in a strange way and in the course of a talk with George Woods himself, which is the name I have given him, though some of it I learned through Robert Addis and when I was a boy.

The Circuit minister had happened to announce at a meeting of Heathley chapel stewards that he knew of a London Evangelist who was suffering from strain of work and needed a holiday in the country. Robert Grinter at once offered to take him in and later he spent a week or two with Robert Addis. I faintly remember him for he would conduct mid-week services at the chapel and would always have a smile and a pat on the head for us boys. Now it was while he was with Robert Addis that he heard about young George Woods.

In the East End of London where he worked, the Evangelist had been a *Valiant-for-Truth*, who would venture down desperate alley-ways and enter a public house to talk to its drunkards, and it might be said that his were souls literally dragged from the pit. So as soon as he heard of Woods—already a drunkard and as foul-mouthed as any in the district—he was anxious about his soul. When he first saw Woods he was making clay lump and the Evangelist was naturally interested in the process and he told both him and the man who was also helping that the Israelites too had made bricks in that way, as one could read in *Exodus*. But when on the strength of that brief conversation he waylaid George and began talking seriously to him and trying to induce him to sign the pledge, he was literally met with a torrent of blasphemy. A further attempt had no better success, and the Evangelist had regretfully to admit that George was a brand that no hand of his could pluck from the burning.

The Evangelist returned to London. Rare news of him reached us from time to time, and then ceased. Many years later he came to Ouseland and preached in the chapel and Robert Addis drove the eight miles to hear him.

After the service Robert Addis, diffident though he always was, made himself known to him, and the two had much talk. Then the Evangelist remembered George Woods and asked what had become of him. Addis told him with a smile that he was now a chapel steward in a village near Heathley and a local preacher on the Hareborough Plan. The Evangelist stared and asked how such a miracle could have come about.

‘He told me himself one day,’ Addis said. ‘It appears he was making clay lumps and some stranger in the village happened to tell him about the Israelites making bricks without straw and how he could read about it in the Bible. Then one day something urged him to read about it and when he had read that much, he began to read on. Then something struck him as it struck Saul of Tarsus.’

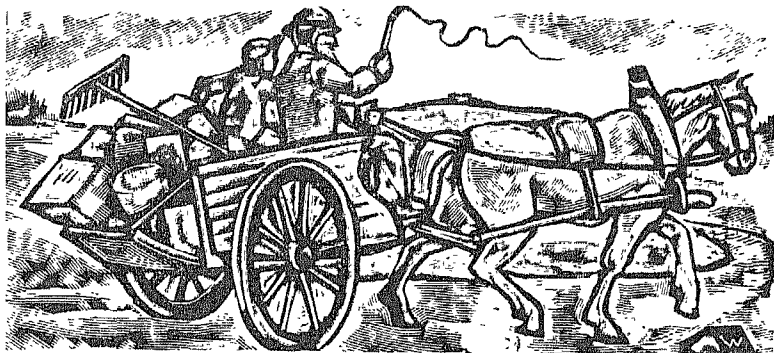
And then Addis saw a strange something upon the face of the Evangelist.

‘Why! It must have been you who talked to him about that clay lump!’

The Evangelist nodded, and his lips shaped themselves to speak. But the words refused to come, and all at once his

hand felt for that of his fellow-labourer in the great vineyard, and the two men stood for a moment this side of eternity, pondering in their hearts the inscrutable purpose and feeling in its nearness a humility that was strangely close to tears.





Chapter X

TWO UNFORGETTABLE MEN

ALL my life, and perhaps as a result of my upbringing, I have been something of a firebrand: a seeker after adventure and trouble, and I have met plenty of both. But when my head was bloody the fault was usually my own, and if it remains unbowed that is merely due to a mulish obstinacy.

In those years I have met many men who might be called famous or great, and of those that I personally class as such I would say that the common denominators were natural courtesy, innate simplicity and an utter absence of aggressive self-assertion. I instance only one—an ex-Viceroy of India on whose Staff I served—and for the purpose of comparison with the purple-faced, hectoring, golf-absorbed old General who preceded him in that particular wartime appointment, and whose only references to myself would be to ‘that bloody poet’. But of all of them I will say this: that even were I so commissioned I could write no biography, for their roots were in other soil than mine. But of two men I could write biographies that would be more than a labour of love. One was Robert Addis and the other John Balfour.

You may remember that in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* there was a certain *Mr. Fearing*. *Great-heart*, who knew him well and had been with him when he came to the River, was relating his life to old *Honesty*, and how he had perpetually suffered from doubts and fears. *Honesty* asked how it could come about that so good, and, in extremity, ultimately so valiant a man could spend his days in such diffidence.

'There are two reasons for it,' said Great-heart. 'One is, the wise God will have it so, for some must pipe and some must weep. *Mr. Fearing* played upon the Bass. He and his fellows sound the Sackbut whose notes are more doleful than the notes of other music; though indeed some say that the Bass is the Ground of music. And for my part I care not at all for a profession that begins not in heaviness of mind. The first string that the Musician usually touches is the Bass, when he intends to put all in tune. God also plays upon this string first, when he sets the soul in tune for himself.'

That is the life of Robert Addis.

When I first knew Robert Addis he was a man of some thirty-five years, of medium height, but sturdy, with black hair and beard. Shortly afterwards he married, and there were three children. He came of a fine old family that had descended somewhat in the social scale, though his own education had been at the ancient Grammar School at Ouseland. It was noteworthy that behind his back even 'them chaps' would refer to him as Master Robert, and would invariably address him as Mr. Addis.

His speech had a slight stammer which would be accompanied by a little nervous titter and the whole of the man was characterized by a curious diffidence that kept him from those offices, both in Methodism and public affairs, to which his education, ability, and outstanding integrity entitled him. On account of his nervousness he was among 'them chaps' a figure of fun and yet with a difference, for they laughed *at* William Cash but *with* Robert Addis, and in the laugh would be something of affection.

For, and strangely enough it may be, he was the one man in the village who could control that unruly gang and handle them. Often they would try to take a rise out of him and there would be whisperings in corners till someone was chosen to try the particular joke, and when he was in the shop the others would be at the windows. It might be to try to beat down the price of an article.

'Not a bad pair o' buskins you've got here, Mr. Addis,' the spokesman would say. 'Give you two bob for 'em.'

The price might be clearly marked as three shillings, and Addis might give that nervous little laugh and a shake of the head.

'Half a crown and they're yours,' he might say, or a quick, 'I'll take it!' and somehow or other the money would always be produced, for he had an uncanny skill in reading his man. And often he would sell him something else. And only in rare cases would he lose money over the transaction, for his prices were so stated as to be always capable of adjustment. Indeed, when a transaction was completed he would often hand back a sixpence or a shilling to the purchaser. Sometimes too of an evening he would come to the shop door and call to one of 'them chaps' who would be given free a huge basket of oranges that were only partly rotten, and then Rounders would cease till the oranges were eaten.

His love for the village youth was both genuine and deep and in some ways it became his hobby. In the Sunday School the elder boys were his special property and there was something else that we owed to him besides those stories from the Old Testament. I would be about nine years old when he founded a library that was open to all, and the charge was only a half-penny a week per book, which monies were spent on upkeep and replacements. Nor were the books religious or portentous though there were among them various illustrated Home and Self Educators, which he would induce the young men of the village to read. For us boys there was Kingston, Fennimore Cooper, Marryat, Lever and even in due course, Rider Haggard and Stanley Weyman.

The cost of these books must have been met largely by himself and you will learn how he kept himself abreast of our tastes. But boys who had read nothing but those old-fashioned Readers owed to Robert Addis far more than a first acquaintance with *Treasure Island* or *David Copperfield*. It was Robert Addis, in fact, who put a leaven into our Heathley lumps. That leaven worked slowly and some of it may be working still.

But to return to that strange diffidence. Everyone recognized him as a man of deep religious consciousness and the embodiment of practical Christianity. Yet, as I have said, his seat was always at the back of the chapel—the seat of a man who dreaded a thrusting forward of self. Like them of the parable, he took a lower seat at the feast, and that, maybe, was why he was called higher. But when a preacher came who was not acquainted with that singular shyness and fear of public profession, and Addis was the senior steward present

at Prayer Meeting, that preacher would naturally say, 'May I call on Brother Addis to lead us in prayer?'

When that happened a deep silence would fall on the congregation and you could hear the very ticking of the clock. We would be saying to ourselves, 'Will he pray?' But there would be no response. Then some good brother would lead off in prayer and the episode would be forgotten, only to happen again before a year was out. But to the end of his days Robert Addis spoke no word. But my father was with him just before he died, and like *Mr. Fearing* at the River his faith at that very last was confident and serene.

I have mentioned his integrity and yet in business he was a man of great shrewdness, as you may have gathered from this and that. In his shop he sold everything a village could need. With Breckland folk of those days it was a point of honour to haggle and bargain, and in such transactions he had an inexhaustible patience and an unruffled temper. But besides the universality of that shop in which one could buy anything from ribbons to tar-rope, there were attached to it two notable appendages—a man and a horse. Shadrach Ward, an old retainer of the family, was Robert Addis's man about the shop; and Punch, the old horse, was for rounds or fetching goods from Wortley Station, and at a pinch he could draw a plough. The ancient cart, however, had not been painted for years and its springs so sagged that it might as well have been a sulky. As for the harness, it had been mended with wire and string, and the holding of the belly-band and our lives and limbs would depend on the strength of a leather bootlace. It was not miserliness that led to such neglect: it was the indifference of Addis to outward show.

Shadrach was an ancient man with stooping shoulders and, like Wyatt, he wore the garments of an earlier generation. Punch was well over twenty when I first knew him, and to say that he was as quiet as a sheep is an understatement, for he seemed perpetually to be asleep. His hips stood high and his knees were broken from many a fall, and yet he had a good heart and could go at a reasonable pace for a long day. Addis, who hated the use of a whip, had his own special means of enlivening him. Punch would be urged to break into a trot, but would pay no heed. Then suddenly Addis would throw his weight forward and bring the old horse almost to his knees and the startled Punch would thereupon break into a

furious trot with the harness straining precariously and the cart bumping on its antiquated springs.

The harnessing of Punch and the putting into the cart was a comedy in which the village would take perpetual delight. Even the noise of it could be heard far beyond the Mound and the wood-yard and people would smile and say to each other, 'Shadrach's harnessing Punch'. For Shadrach was apparently of the opinion that he was handling a none too docile tiger and was in imminent danger of being savaged and maimed, for all the while he would be roaring, 'Darst ye, then?' and, 'You do if ye darst!' and he would tug at the bit and then dart back to arms' length as if in fear of imminent reprisals. Then at last the old nag would be safely between the shafts and Shadrach would nod to himself at the passing of one more dangerous moment.

I suppose it was to myself that Robert Addis talked more freely than to any soul in Heathley, and this is how it came about. At the end of that first harvest of mine in Heathley I happened to have some leisure, and my mother, who wanted me to settle down in the village, said to me, 'Why don't you go and see Mr. Addis? I know he's been looking for a boy to take with him on his Wednesday rounds.'

Thereafter in the holidays and for many years I would spend that Wednesday with Robert Addis, and even now I know that those were the happiest days of my life. But it is of the summer days that I principally think. How it should have come about that Robert Addis should have had customers in lonely heath farms and cottages and in villages as much as ten miles from Heathley I could never make out, but maybe such customers had once lived nearer Heathley and had dealt with his father, and no one who had dealt with an Addis would ever change.

Just before ten o'clock my mother would give me my little packet of food and off I would go to the shop. Punch would be drawn up outside and Shadrach and his master would be loading the boxes of orders, which would be so piled that there would be scarcely room between seat and dashboard to put one's feet. Then off we would go by the Wortley road and the first stop would be well beyond Wortley village, Addis would take a box to a cottage and I learned to know to a second how long it would be before he returned. That would give me time for bird-nesting or to throw a stone in

the hope of killing a rabbit, or I would read the *Sunday Companion* or the current copy of *Horner's Weekly*, which would be in the boxes we were taking to customers. Sometimes we would go across heath tracks and have to return by the same route, but I know it was always after noon that we would come to the cottages of Smokers Hole. After that we would cross the Hareborough turnpike and a mile on there was a little hill that had on it a clump of ancient pines and it was under them that we would invariably draw. Punch would be given his nosebag and we two would sit on the pine-needles and eat our lunch. Always at the end of his meal Robert Addis would hand me one of his wife's short-cakes. To a boy the food of another will always taste better than his own, but never did I taste a shortcake like those of Robert Addis.

We would spend best part of an hour there beneath the pines, and all the time, and indeed through all the lonely miles of that round, we would be talking. It might be about the book I was reading and what I would like to read next, and what other boys liked. Or he would tell me about the country through which we passed and far-off history, such as the great battles that had been fought in Saxon times at Langmere and Ringmere. Sometimes he would draw back the curtain from his own youth, and among the things that he began to teach me was algebra! As for those lonely miles they would lead us across the great heaths and past *Stanford Cock* and out to the two Toftwolds, the most distant of which we would reach by the late afternoon, and a woman at a certain cottage would always make us a cup of tea and give us bread and butter. Then when the cart was cleared, except for empty boxes, Punch would somehow know that his head was turned for home and there was no need to worry about his pace. That homeward route was a different one, for it would be through Tottley, over Black Rabbit Warren, past Gallows Hill and the Peddars' Way and so to Wortley Road again. Sometimes it would be seven o'clock when we drove up to the shop. Shadrach would be waiting there to go through the dangerous process of unharnessing Punch, and I would always be given a packet of sweets and twopence for myself.

The debt I owe to Robert Addis is an incalculable one, and when he died the youth of Heathley lost more than a friend. I was in Egypt when I learned of his death. It was a shock,

for he was far from old, and it was a loss that saddened me for days. Then when his small estate came to be settled—and the village thought him a wealthy man—it was found that he had left comparatively little, for his left hand had never known the charities of his right. When William Cash died I doubt if the whole district was five pounds in his debt. When Robert Addis died, debt upon debt came to light and always of the old and the very poor.

On an inside wall of the village chapel is a brass plate to his memory and that is right and seemly. But men who are old still speak of him and call him Master Robert, and that in itself is an intimacy of remembrance and an epitaph.

John Balfour was a fine figure of a man: six foot in height and broad-shouldered, and even in his last days a notable walker. He had a ruddy face and his reddish beard was trimmed to a point, and that gave his cheeks a kind of plumpness. Generations of Heathley owed to him their schooling and though they were unaware of it they owed perhaps far more. As a disciplinarian he was stern, as indeed he had to be to rule that motley throng, and if the cane were not to hand then his hand would serve, and more than once he would catch me a box on the ears that would lift me from my feet and land me a yard or two away.

There would be perhaps a hundred pupils under his direct charge, and that would mean setting one class to work and rushing to start off another and then to examine a third. And there would be the class of the pupil-teacher and yet another of the assistant to supervise and watch and at the same time to keep a wary eye on those he had left working behind him. When I look back now it seems to me a miracle that a man could so work and survive. And yet in later years he would tell me of the frustration of those hampering curricula and of the things he had wished to do; and some indeed he did do, and in defiance of regulations. In those days, too, the hours were excessively long. Each schoolday morning the village would see him and his wife making their way towards the school soon after eight o'clock: he always alert to return the salutes of villagers or pupils and accommodating his pace to the slow and genteel walk of his wife. For there would be many things to do before the first warning bell was rung at a quarter to nine, and it would be rung loudly and long and be

heard by the stragglers across the heaths. At nine o'clock would come the second bell and the day would begin. At midday there would be a break of an hour and a half, though his own time for leisure might be scarcely half an hour; but when school ended at four o'clock he would often remain until six for it was his duty to coach the pupil-teacher and the young assistant.

But John Balfour was more than the village schoolmaster, even if the village knew him by no other name than the Master and his wife as the Mistress, for there were few village activities in which he did not take a leading part. If it were secretarial work that were needed then John Balfour was the only man, for he wrote a copper-plate that was finer even than that printed in our special writing-books. I have mentioned that he was Clerk to the Parish Council: he was also secretary to the Flower Show Committee, village scorer at cricket and the Heathley correspondent for the Norwich newspapers. When anything happened in Heathley it was he who would write the account and would often interview us personally for the purpose, and the following Friday the village would have the thrill of seeing its name in print. As he had a warm spot in his heart for the Homes and things were always unaccountably happening to us, we rarely seemed out of the news, and I well remember the shamefacedness with which I would read some over-generous appraisal of my own performances.

John Balfour was responsible for the first school concert ever given in Heathley, and that notable event took place the second winter after my return to the village, and it might be quoted as an example of those things which a man of both vision and sympathy saw as needful for the Heathley youth.

It was held in the school and never was a building more closely packed. There are two things that I recall of that evening and two that I have heard from my mother. My own remembrances were of taking part in a performance of *Ten Little Nigger Boys* and having to bob down behind a screen at the correct moment; and I remember John Balfour's own rendering of *Off to Philadelphia*, for he had the best baritone in the parish and was leader of the church choir.

The two stories my mother has told me are these. When a special song was rendered by picked children's voices, the master was on the platform conducting with a home-made baton. Granny Shaw was there and sitting by my mother

and this business of conducting was altogether beyond her. She was slightly deaf and therefore would speak more loudly than she knew, and it was in a voice that was audible to all that she suddenly asked, 'What's he a-doin on up there with that little wand?'¹

The other story is of the announcer of the items on the programme, and he was a local farmer. One of such announcements was that Miss Maud Bird would now favour us with a rendering on the piano of *Sweet Belly Mahone*. For those who are not familiar with that particular piece I would say that the middle word is Belle, and even our village audience had occasion to titter.

But there were more difficulties with which John Balfour had to contend in that village school. If he ever managed to unearth a promising pupil it would always be that very pupil who would be taken from school at the earliest legal moment, and often before, and to spend his days on the land. Then there were parents both ignorant and hostile who would make his life a misery, and even my own parents were not wholly free from blame. My mother objected to my ears being boxed, thinking it might cause deafness, and my father would have stormy interviews with the master, and when my father stormed it was a pretty disturbing business. And, on the more amusing side, there were parents who would persist in regarding the school as free to entry at all hours. The correct procedure was to enter the porch and then knock at the outer door, when the master himself would open it and interview the caller in the porch or on the steps. I remember a day when Sam Smith arrived at the door with his horse and cart. Suddenly the door was opened and Sam appeared, face black as a nigger's from his handling of the coal. While we stared in amazement he put his finger in his mouth to attract the attention of the master who was at the far end of the room, and after that shrill whistle announced, 'Hi! I browt the coal!' Then there was Mrs. Dew, wife of George Dew the blacksmith, who suddenly entered the school and refused to leave, even when John Balfour took her by the arm, until he discovered and returned Bertie's alley. Herbert, her son, had apparently been playing marbles and had lost his favourite alley, but for the rest of his life Bertie's Alley was his nickname.

¹ Pronounced to rhyme with *band*.

But there was something far more tragic in the life of John Balfour. Some years later he heard that I was likely to be in Devonshire and he came to see me. Even now I feel a shame that it was of me that he had to ask that particular favour. It was this. Maybe in a certain Devonshire town I might hear something of himself and whatever it was that I heard he begged of me never to repeat it to a living soul. My curiosity was aroused, however, and when I duly arrived in that particular town I managed to learn the whole history. John Balfour had been headmaster there but had been threatened with dismissal because of the drinking habits of his wife. So he had thrown up that comparatively lucrative post and had come right across England to a humble school in a Breckland village.

So great a respect had the village for him that as by some mutual agreement it would conceal from us children those drinking bouts of his wife, and all we knew was that she was ill and absent. And to think of her as a drunkard was impossible with her quiet refined voice, placid manners, and silvery head of hair.

Once more at the risk of seeming ostentatious I would explain my own close association with John Balfour. When I first entered that school he merely asked my age and then placed me in what he considered the suitable class. Within a week or two, however, he discovered that among his geese and ducklings he had a most amazing sort of swan, and in less than no time I had gone up two whole classes. Then he interviewed my mother—between them there was always a tremendous understanding and affection—and told her that in his opinion I should one day be Lord Mayor of London. Why he chose that particular eminence I do not know, but thereafter I would have to go to him on two nights a week for private tuition, and it was thanks to that and to him that at so young an age I passed the entrance examination to Ouseland Grammar School. He also would lend me books and I remember particularly a complete set of Scott, all of which I devoured during one summer and while fishing with home-made rod and line in a pit on the Top Breck. Through that reading I won at Ouseland a valuable scholarship which changed the course of my life. High marks were allotted for English, and one of the subjects for the hour's essay was Astrology. The eyes of the examiner must have popped open

when he read my account derived largely from *Woodstock*, and Flibbertigibbet and the underground cavern.

When we grew up he would never meet my mother without inquiring for each one of us, and particularly myself. And then soon after the last war he retired. His later years had been full of troubles for his wife had died—and to her he was always devoted whatever her failings—and his only son had been killed in France. His pension was a pittance and his days had to be spent in the cottage of a daughter who had married a labourer, and he had no room of his own and no comfort or peace among her young and growing family.

Whenever I was at home I would get him to spend an evening at our house, and would make up a four at whist from among his old scholars. The times had changed but though cards might still be the Devil's Picture-books, it was enough for my mother that John Balfour was playing. Even Mrs. Battle had not such a rigour of the game, and I can still see his smiles and his grim despairs and hear the chuckle with which he would smack down a final and winning card. He loved those evenings and I always felt a hurt for his gratitude.

He died at a great age, for he was over ninety. In his last years he grew more and more deaf and his memory began mercifully to fail. But he would still take those long walks, pipe in mouth, and when he met my mother would begin to ask after one of us. Then his memory would fail, the tears would come to his eyes and he would be shaking her by the hand and pleading in a broken voice forgiveness for that lack of remembrance. I was many miles away when news of his death reached me, and a busy man, but it will be a shame till the day of my death that I did not somehow make time to attend his funeral. But I would now ask permission to tell one story of him, not because I myself am a character. That story more than any other that my life has known is full of that deep and poignant irony which is the basis of all tragedy. I learnt it from John Balfour himself, one summer night when we were sitting in my garden; for as a small boy it had been inexplicable to me that tears should come to the master's eyes. Some of the story I had deduced or gathered, but that evening—and quietly and slowly—he told me the things which made it complete.

In that time of the war between the Greeks and Turks there

would be in the window of William Cash pictures of the battles, and I was much attracted by them. From one of the Kerridges I would borrow newspapers and on a certain afternoon when I should have been doing something else I was reading about my heroes the Greeks. John Balfour knew that I had something concealed beneath the desk and he called me out to the front. The newspaper was produced and at once he snatched it from me and a box of the ears landed me against the wall.

There was reason for his shortness of temper. That very morning he had heard that on the morrow a certain Inspector was coming to make a special examination of the school, and the very fact that it was special filled him with more than forebodings. At the end of that inspection there could be only one result. It was the heat of summer and never had that motley collection of pupils been more drowsy or stupid. His pupil-teacher—a girl from a nearby village—was stupid too, and he had thought of dismissing her, and for her mistakes he also would be responsible. In the presence of the inspector even a pupil who was reasonably bright would be tongue-tied, and an answer would inevitably be the wrong one. Indeed, when John Balfour received the letter announcing that inspection, such a wretchedness came over him that he would have given much to ease his misery with tears.

But that same evening while he was staying on late to coach his young staff, his wife went home early and when he himself came into the cottage he found her lying drunk. Where she could get that liquor was a mystery, though generally it came through outside tradesmen, but there she was, and the next day was the day of the inspection. Somehow he got her to bed and then again that tremendous despair laid hold on him, and so deep was it that try as he might he could find no assuagement in tears. And that same night my father happened to learn of that box on the ears and the following morning he gave me a verbal message which I was to deliver to the master, that if he did not call at our house on his way home from morning school, then my father would see him at the school itself.

I delivered that message and John Balfour knew what it meant. For a moment, and for the first time in his life, and for the only time, I think he hated both me and my father, for I saw a something in his eyes. And then at ten o'clock

the horse and trap from the *Lion* drew up at the door and there was the inspector, a tall, black-bearded man whom I remember well.

Naturally I do not recall the events of that morning, but John Balfour told me that there was no exhibition of ignorance and of bad teaching which the pupils did not exhibit, and he was ignorant, moreover, of what was happening in the Infants' Room, for though he had somehow managed to get his wife to the school, after one of those bouts of hers she would be incapable of work or authority. But now the despair had become a kind of numbness and it was even with something of resignation that he could contemplate a leaving of the village that had long been his home and the finding if possible of a new post in which to end his days.

The inspector had been non-committal, and after dinner we all assembled again. Then it so happened that according to the time-table and the curriculum the master had to take my class and an older one in geography, and that year we were supposed to be 'doing' Europe. I can still hear our repetition of those rivers which we had committed to memory—

Volga, Don, Dneiper, Dneister
Danube, Po, Adige, Arno
Tiber, Rhone, Ebro . . .

and all that in a monotonous sing-song. The inspector, approaching the class, nodded to John Balfour and smiled, and then began to take us himself. His was a different kind of geography. His finger went to the map and to Greece.

'To what country am I pointing?'

There were two or three who could tell him that.

'And can any boy tell me anything special about this country called Greece?'

There was a silence, and then up went my hand.

'Yes?' he said.

'Please, sir, the Greeks are fighting the Turks.'

'That's right,' he said. 'And why are they fighting?'

I will not bore you with what followed, but we had what amounted to a ten minute private conversation, and one thing that I particularly remember is that I gave as my reason for liking the Greeks the fact that they wore short skirts, and that seemed to amuse him. But when our conversation was over he brought that geography lesson to an abrupt end, and

in front of all of us he turned to John Balfour and what he said amounted to this.

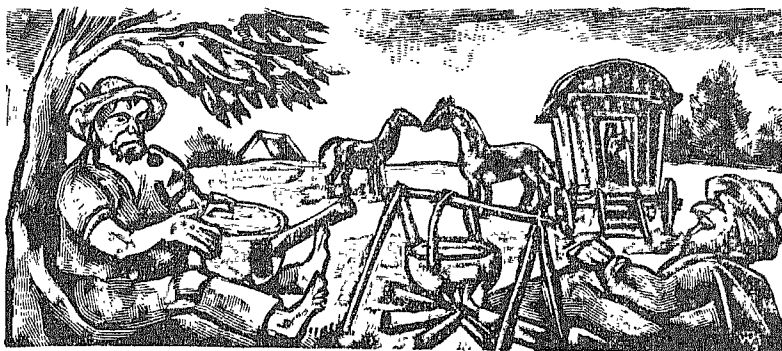
'You boys should be grateful that you have a master who goes out of his way to tell you the things which he thinks you ought to know: not things in books or names on maps, but about real people and real happenings.'

The inspection came to an end and we were dismissed. In the log book the inspector wrote a summary of his impressions, and they were words of sympathy and unstinted praise. Mary Balfour had gone home, and no sooner had the inspector left than John Balfour left too and all the way to his cottage his heart was flooding with the joy of that day, and in his throat there would rise a something that was near to those longed-for tears. I was playing by myself on the verge near the chapel when he neared his home, and when he saw me, there was an urge to call me and to utter a word of commendation and thanks. I came up frightenedly, remembering only that box of the ears and all that it might mean. And I was worried about that confiscated newspaper which belonged to Farmer Kerridge.

'Michael?' he said, and then his hand stirred, for he had wished to pat me on the head.

But I saw a coming blow and cringed back. I still see his eyes as he looked down at me; a small boy shrinking away and with a hand lifted to guard a face. Then all at once he turned away, and I saw that in his eyes were tears. There was something strange in that and even frightening, and I turned back as if to run home. Then when I glanced again there was something stranger still, for his arms were on the garden gate and between them his head was bowed.





Chapter XI

SOME HEATHLEY ODDMENTS

I DO not know what the ghost of old Dr. Soffe would think if it saw itself classed as a Heathley oddment, but the title is one of convenience. It includes not only those tradesmen ancillary, in however wide a connotation, to farmwork, but also the frequent and the stray callers on the village, and even those who would often pass straight through. Those latter were principally tramps.

The shortest way between the workhouses of Hareborough and Ouseland was by the heath turnpike, but many tramps would choose to come through Heathley. If my father met a tramp he would harangue him and then perhaps give him twopence, for with him instruction came first and charity after. But my mother had too tender a heart. A tale of woe would always produce a meal and even a cup of tea, not that she was troubled much by tramps.

But the thing I shall always remember about tramps was a certain happening of my earliest boyhood. My father had ordered two half-trucks of coal to be sent to Wortley Station and at different times, but he was always slap-dash and in a tremendous hurry, and it was doubtless his fault that a whole truck arrived, and it was towards the end of October. Further there came a notice from the station that there would be demurrage if the truck was not cleared within a matter of days, and my father was only too aware that there was not a man or boy to be had in the village.

That afternoon we were at tea when the dog gave a growl.

My father got up at once and went to explore. Just short of the kennel stood two tramps and the dog was making a set at them. My father ran his eye over them. They looked strong and sturdy and suddenly he had an idea.

‘What are you lookin for? Work?’

I imagine they gave a dry smile.

‘If you are,’ my father said, ‘then I’ve got work for ye. And good food thrown in.’

‘And how long’s it for?’ one asked.

‘A couple of days if you do the job well,’ my father told him. ‘And it’ll bring you half a crown a day apiece. But you won’t get that till the job’s over.’

Never in those days did I know a tramp do even an hour’s work, but there must have been something about my father that attracted them, and maybe they were tramps of some better kind, or perhaps they thought, like Jurgén, that any drink should be tried once. At any rate the deal was made.

I never knew my mother so angry and so frightened. According to her we might all be murdered in our beds, and the very least that could happen would be the decamping of the men with everything of value on which they could lay their hands. But my father stood his ground. That night, after a good supper, the men slept in a shed on new clean hay and in the morning—for we were all alive in spite of fears—they had pails of water and towels and soap. Cold food and drink was packed for them and my father and off they set in the big cart. It was late when they returned, and to a hot meal, and my father reported a fine day’s work. The third morning came and even my mother said good-bye to them when they left, for in some strange way they had become almost friends, and for years after that we could never see a tramp without scanning his face, and even my mother would often wonder what had become of them.

Gypsies, as befits Borrow’s county, were fairly common, and they were of two kinds. There would be a caravan that would pass slowly through the village and the women from it would sell clothes-pegs and its man would be a tinker. One of these women, and my mother remembered her well, was the mother of Gypsy Smith, the evangelist. But there was another sort of gypsy. Two or three caravans would all at once be on the Common and with them would be many horses, but the men of those caravans would never enter the

village. My father had many dealings with them and it was rare that they left without our having a new horse or pony. Well do I remember the day when my father came into breakfast and motioned to us children to keep quiet. Suddenly the loveliest pony we had ever seen appeared all alone in the doorway. Its hoofs were heard on the kitchen floor and before my mother could turn round it was nuzzling her neck. That was Tom—Brown Tom he should have been called—the faithfullest pony that ever I knew.

After one departure of the gypsies, and they would be here one moment and gone the next, Grey Jack had gone with them and we had the roan mare. That was what we always called her and she had no other name. Of all the horses in Heathley—and I do not except Green's—she was the best. My father once laughed at an offer of fifty guineas for her, and in those days—and to him—that was a tremendous sum. But a child could drive her and on our treacherous roads she had not only a sure step but my father would bet any man that he would drive her to Harford Station, which was four miles, in under fifteen minutes, and without a touch of the whip.

Dickey dealers—dealers who drove a donkey cart—were common too, and there would always be rabbit-skins ready in one of the sheds. A halfpenny was the summer price but in winter a good one might fetch three-halfpence, and those monies were my mother's perquisite. But there was one dealer who would always come on a dark night and when my father recognized the steps of his pony he would leave the house and tell me to remain indoors. His Christian name, I remember, was the strange one of Bensley, and though I rarely saw him, what I did know was this. In some shed I might have seen through a crack that many rabbits were hanging, but the morning after one of Bensley's calls that shed door would be unlocked and the rabbits gone.

One famous dealer—known well enough to my father—was called Tinker Joe, and he lies buried in Heathley churchyard. His tombstone is still clear and it reads—

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF

JOSEPH ASHTON.

Born — Died —
Aged 112 years.

And then the apposite text that he had come to his grave like the corn in full ear. I mention that as a curiosity, for I doubt if few English villages can show the like.

Another queer visitor of fifty years ago was an itinerant photographer, and his caravan stood on a meadow near our house for many months. He was an elderly man, and the strangest bird that ever flew into our parish; upright in carriage, apeing the artistic in dress, and wearing a Louis Napoleon moustache and imperial. My father would induce him to come to chapel and on such occasions he would be asked to tea. One evening after service we sang, *Abide with Me*, to the tune Sandon, and when we looked round at a queer sound behind us, there was the old man in tears. After that there was always a corner for him in my mother's heart. All the village had itself 'took' while he was there, and I remember too that he did a conversation piece of the Home family, and when we would see it in later years we would laugh till the tears came.

Antique dealers would occasionally come from Norwich, and the first I remember was in my very early years. My mother went to the door at his knock and I believe she thought him a tradesman come to collect some bill. I was with her and I remember her inquiring look at me when he asked if we had any Bartolozzi prints. That inquiry puzzled me and I asked John Balfour about it, but he knew nothing, and probably because I had wrongly caught the words. Then I plucked up courage and spoke to the Reverend one day when I happened to meet him. It was not far from the vicarage and he at once turned back and took me to his drawing-room and there showed me such a print. It was that episode that made me all my life a collector.

Sometimes a chapman would call at the house with his huge box of ribbons and buttons and pins. My mother would always buy something from him and I can still see him lifting his box by the leather strap and hoisting it to his back. Another regular caller was a Hareborough watchmaker and he would come once a month on a Tuesday and bring back clocks and watches and take new commissions. I remember that he always seemed to time his visits to our house when we were all seated at tea, and then he would sit down with us, and when the meal was over he would hold my father's watch to his ear and have a quick look at all our clocks. I was

always most interested and I doubt he would have been unconvinced if assured by Isaiah himself that the small boy who watched so closely would one day have in his Company the young son then in a Hareborough cradle.

Then there was Doctor Soffe, who followed hard on the heels of Granny Shaw in bringing us children into the world. His was a fine trap and his nags always upstanding ones, and his coachman was always in livery. He had a dry and abrupt way of speech and if you would like to see him you may do so, for he was the very spit of the doctor in Luke Fildes's picture, now in the Tate.

I came into close contact with him on only one occasion, and that was when I suddenly began to grow, and the process made me so thin that my mother was convinced that I was consumptive.

'So he may be,' said my father with a grunt, 'but if so, it's of food.'

But my mother was not satisfied and Soffe was called in. He stripped me and examined me and then told me to dress again.

'Is there anything wrong with him?' asked my mother anxiously, for he had given never a sign.

Soffe made for the door and halted with his hand on the knob.

'There are lean kinds and fat kinds, aren't there?' was what he told her, in his curt way. 'He happens to be one of the lean kinds. He eats well.'

'Yes, doctor.'

'Sleeps well?'

'Yes, doctor.'

'Then why the devil did you waste my time,' said Soffe and gave the door a slam behind him.

But perhaps—I might even say I hope—you have found these visitors an insipid and characterless lot, and it is good to stay at home again, for the Heathley air would somehow make men salty and there were few of whom some tale could not be told. Take Dan Hewson, for instance, who was a jobbing carpenter and builder. Dan had a nickname which arose like this. He was most secretive about the tricks of his trade. Once, and just before my time, he was called in to mend some plaster that had fallen from the clay-lump wall of a house and when the plaster was dry, Dan wiped it over with some ordinary distemper.

'That's rare nice stuff you're puttin on there, Dan,' said the woman of the house. 'What do you call it?'

'That?' said Dan, and gave a mysterious nod. 'That's what they call rum stuff.' And Rum Stuff he remained from then on.

But there is a story about Dan which can now be told, for Colonel Pewtrance is dead and gone and I doubt if his heirs and assigns could maintain an action. Dan did some taking work on that fencing by the Peddars' Way and when Pewtrance began to go wrong, as we called it, he was in Dan's debt to the extent of a good many pounds. Then someone told Dan that the Colonel was going bankrupt. One or two men had been to collect their bills and the Colonel had made them accept half in full payment and had told them to think themselves lucky to get so much.

That night, and in great alarm, Dan made out his bill. The Colonel was away but he learned that he would be back on such and such a date, and soon after the Colonel's arrival, Dan was at the door. The butler said the Colonel was not at home, but Dan forced his way in, and had to be shown to the Colonel's study.

Dan thrust the bill under his nose.

'There y'are, sir. I think you'll find that correct.'

Pewtrance spread his palms. He was sorry, but he could not pay. But if Hewson cared to take half the amount and call the bill settled, that was the best he could do. And he strongly advised him to accept the offer. Dan protested vehemently. He was a poor man with others to support. The work had been done and the money earned. But Pewtrance was adamant and Dan had to give in. Then he had a last idea.

'All right, sir; I'll take it,' he said reluctantly. 'But you'll have to give me that set of harness what's hangin out there in the shed.'

It was a fine brass-mounted set that just fitted Dan's pony, and the Colonel with a shrug of the shoulders told him he could have it. Then he gave Dan a cheque for about forty pounds. Dan took the set of harness and at once drove all the way to Ouseland, and to his inexpressible relief the bank paid cash.

Months afterwards, when Pewtrance had left Brackford, my father said to Dan, 'You won't have much cause to think well of him, Dan. A nice little sum he did you out of.'

Dan took a quick look round.

'That he didn't,' he said.

'But he only gave you half your bill?'

'I know,' said Dan. 'But I doubled it when I made it out. And I got that set o' harness.'

In my father's young days the village would have its boots made by the village bootmaker, and in John Till's shop, which was next door to his father's cottage, were scores of lasts that bore particular names. I remember having a pair or two made, but John had largely descended to cobbling, and at a pinch would mend anything made of leather. But as I have mentioned Josh again, and before we leave him for ever, there is a story I would like to tell, for my father would often repeat it.

Josh was as curious a man as ever was born, and his questions would get on my father's nerves. One day Josh came across my father who happened to be carrying a new dung-fork.

'Whuh, that's a rare nice fork you've got there, Master Home,' said Josh. 'Would you mind tellin me what you paid for it'—and then at the look on my father's face—'*not that I want to know.*'

Sam Smith was one of our most boastful characters and whatever he did would always be with an eye to an onlooker. My father had a good story to tell of Sam's father, the one you may remember who burned the treasury notes. Old Sam had work in those same Illboro marshes where I got lost as a boy, and it was upon him, too, that a November fog descended when he was making his way home. Fogs of a dense and a pea-soup nature were rare enough with us, and this particular one scared old Sam to his very bones. When he had wandered for hours, it seemed, he decided to go no farther but made his way up the branches of a young elm and there began hollering, 'Man a-lorst! Man a-lorst!' at the top of his lungs. Within a minute or so someone had located him. Sam had so circled round that he was within a hundred yards of his own backdoor and the village, and it was with a remarkable sheepishness that he descended from his perch.

The Sam of my time was a man of mighty frame and a prodigious eater, and of that we shall hear more later. As to his boastfulness there is a story which became a village byword,

and I am afraid it was my father who set it going. The name of Sam's wife was Keziah, by the way, of which our diminutive is Kizzy. My father called to see Sam one day and found him and his wife and his numerous family at dinner. A pig had recently been killed and Sam had had some of the fry, as we always called the liver and lights and other trimmings. On Sam's dish, too, was also a lump of boiled bacon, and on my father's entry Sam drew himself up importantly at the head of the table and remarked to his wife, 'Kizzy, maw, carve you the liver while I carve this here bacon.' A Breckland man would see the joke, but for your benefit I will explain that what Sam was trying to make appear a banquet was probably a dish into which a hungry man would have made a considerable hole. And it was Sam who, having gorged and gorged at the Heathley dinner that celebrated Victoria's Jubilee, made an apt and courteous reply to the Reverend who had asked him with considerable irony if he had made a good meal.

'That I have sir,' said Sam. 'My old belly's so tight you could crack a flea on't.'

Warrening was a great trade among us in winter and there were warreners of various kinds: those employed by the estate for instance; those who were hired by some farmer to kill his rabbits at so much a dozen, and those who would buy a farmer's rabbits for a lump sum and then do the killing themselves. My father, who loved warrening, would often purchase a farmer's rabbits because it gave an excuse at the sport, for in it there is certainly very much of a sporting element. In that context I would like to tell you a story in which the laugh is against myself. I tell it in no spirit of irreverence or flippancy, and it is as clear in my mind as if it were only yesterday that it happened.

My father had bought the rabbits on a large farm on the fringes of the heath country some five miles from our village and well beyond Shopleigh. That particular day in early January I had been permitted to accompany him and his man, and we had a fine day's sport and did well. Then we came to a very large burrow which it might take several hours to work, so my father decided to skim the cream, as it were, by using purse-nets and putting in cooped ferrets, and for the benefit of the uninitiated, I should say that that is a ferret with its mouth tied. The rabbits bolted well and, what was

more, the cooped ferrets came out too, so that we were able to retrieve them. But one, a large white ferret, did not come out, so my father set me to watch for it while he and the man huddled¹ and hulked² the dead rabbits and prepared for the homeward journey.

By then it was getting late and my father had some meeting or other in the very early evening, but as the ferret was a valuable one he decided to move off and leave me there to retrieve it, though I was no more than nine years old.

'As soon as it starts gettin dark do you come home,' he said, 'and then spread these livers so that he don't leave the burrow if he come out in the night. And here's tuppence for you, son. If you feel hungry you can stop at Obadiah's shop and buy yourself some biscuits.'

I was left alone on that open heath. It was exciting for a few minutes and then when dusk grew nearer I began to be afraid, for I was thinking of the lonely two miles to Shopleigh and the track that ran between woods. Then I had an inspiration. Did not the preachers say that whoever had faith could remove mountains? Then why shouldn't I pray that the ferret might come 'out? Then I remembered an insuperable difficulty. Only a Christian could pray like that and I had never been converted.

So I set about the hasty business of getting myself converted. I prayed so hard and with my fingers pressed so tightly on my eyeballs that in front of them there seemed to be some kind of golden light, and as time was pressing I decided to recognize that as something of the flash of light that struck down Saul. So there I was, duly converted, and at once I began to pray, and with due reminder of the scriptural promise, that the ferret might leave the burrow. I had a look round and as there was no sign of it I prayed again. Imagine the thrill when I saw a something white on the far side! In a flash I was running towards it.

No sooner was that ferret in my bag than off I set at a trot for it was now practically dark. I sang hymns to keep my courage up, and then suddenly there came to me the astounding revelation that I was really converted! The incontrovertible proof lay in the fact that my prayer had been answered. And not only that. As I hurried through the woods towards Shopleigh I knew that in my hands

¹ Slit a sinew of a back leg and put the other through it.

² De-gutted.

was something tremendous and akin to magic. If my prayers would produce a ferret, what else could they not do?

I came to the outskirts of Shopleigh and to the shop of Obadiah Church, the baker. When I turned the handle of the door I found that the door was ajar and when I entered there was no sound of the warning bell. The tiny shop was empty and lighted only by a dim oil lamp, and in the house was never a sound. Then I smelt something and there beneath my nose was a box of chocolate cream bars. The devil was at my ear and too much for me, and in a moment I had pocketed two of the bars and was out of the shop. On the rest of the two-mile journey I ate one of the bars and when I reached home it was so late that my mother was putting the girls to bed. My father was at his meeting and she was angry with him for having left me there on the heath, and perhaps that was why she had made me a tiny pork dumpling all to myself with vegetables and gravy. I gave her a bar of the chocolate cream.

'Now that *is* a good boy,' she said. 'But wherever did you get it?'

I explained about the twopence and how I preferred chocolate to biscuits and I remember that she kissed me. Then while she was finishing with the girls I settled to my meal and it was then that I realized the tremendous thing that I had irrevocably lost. Only an hour before I had had it in my power to move mountains and I had been one of the elect. Now all that had gone and never again could it possibly return. And yet?

My mother's feet were heard on the stairs and I was calling to her.

'Mother?'

'Yes, dear?'

'Mother, if a man get converted and then go and sin, can he ever get converted again?'

'What strange questions you do ask,' my mother said.

'Yes, but can he, mother?'

'Of course he can,' she told me. 'The Bible says until seventy times seven. But why did you ask?'

'Oh, I just wondered,' I said with an assumption of indifference, and then settled with a new and tremendous zest to my meal.

There is another story about a warrener of the name of Whiggett and he was of the kind that kills rabbits at so much a dozen. An honest warrener of that sort has a golden thumb, for he would nearly always contrive to smuggle home a pair of rabbits as his private perquisite. Now George Spline wanted a pair of rabbits for a niece who was returning to London, so he asked him to bring a pair home, and this the warrener promised to do.

But Whiggett had long been suspected, and that day he became aware that he was under observation. When it was time to knock off the farmer appeared to take away the day's kill and found the rabbits already huddled and hulked.

'A dozen and a half,' he said. 'Is that all there are?'

'That's right,' said Whiggett. 'And a hard day's work it were too.'

Whiggett set off for home, the digging spud looped through the ferret box across his shoulder. At Illboro ford he found a policeman waiting and was told that he had authority to search. So Whiggett was searched but nothing was found on him. So thorough was the search that he even looked in the ferret box where the two ferrets were curled up and asleep, though only a fool could have suspected that rabbits could have been put in that box and still have been uneaten.

Whiggett reached home and George Spline came to see him.

'A bad hat about your rabbits, George,' he said, and explained why. George took the loss in good part and congratulated Whiggett on his escape, for that particular night happened to be the only one when Whiggett had not come home with a pair. And then, to George's amazement, Whiggett was lifting the hay on which the ferrets had slept and under it were a couple of rabbits.

'Whuh, how was it the old ferrets didn't chew 'em all up?' asked the still bewildered George.

Whiggett explained with a wink. Before the arrival of the farmer he had so gorged the two ferrets on the little bellies of the rabbits that they were absolutely comatose. In fact, as Whiggett said, they were still swollen and distended and it might be days before they were hungry enough for work.

I used to love watching our road-men. Usually they were old men and they had a tremendous skill in cracking flints.

On the heap would be a sack on which they would sit straddled; their eyes would be protected with gauze and with the long hammer they would give the toughest flint a tap in the exact spot and at once it would fly to pieces. Then with the rake in the left hand they would drag the broken flints towards them. Our methods of road-mending in those far-off days were crude in the extreme. The broken flints would be spread over the road and over them would be put a layer of white marl. The rest was left to traffic and gradually the wheels of wagons and carts would grind at least the tracks into something of smoothness, but many of the flints would lie loose and scattered through the summer. That was dangerous enough for driving and hard on wheels, both of carts and bicycles, and even in later years I esteemed myself lucky if I ever rode from Heathley to Ouseland without a puncture or two. I can also remember our first stretch of granite road, which was a mile from Wortley Station towards Heathley. The village would mention with awe the prodigious sum it was costing and we boys would be fascinated by the steam-roller, and when at last we drove along it it was as though one floated on air.

The best road-man story that I know is this. A certain surveyor ordered one of our old men to cut a gully to carry surplus road water after heavy rains, but he judged the spot wrongly and up the side of a basin, as it were, instead of at the very bottom. A few days later and after rain he happened to be passing, and there, just short of the gully, was a huge pool of water. The road-man was at once fetched to see it.

'What sort of a job do you call that?' the surveyor demanded.

'Tain't my fault,' the man said. 'It's the fault of this here Heathley water.'

'How do you make that out?' demanded the surveyor.

'Well, it's such darn rum water,' the man told him. 'No matter how I try I can't get the jolly stuff to run uphill.'

Among god-wotters, week-enders and many of the programme compilers of the B.B.C., there seems to be an impression that the principal character in the village is the publican—or should I keep in the fashion and call him inn-keeper or Boniface? But I have yet to know a village in which that was the case, and in the four pubs of Heathley there was never an outstanding man. At the *Lion* I remember one

shifty and flashy landlord, but the only publican whom I recall with something beyond pleasure was the landlord of that little ale-house a licence for which was refused just after my arrival in the village.

Bob Bennett—so rich and fruity a character deserves his right name—took to dealing after the loss of his pub, and that loss disturbed no jot of his heartiness. Bob never used our Breckland *bor* though Breckland himself to the very marrow. His particular greeting to all and sundry would be, 'How are ye, m'old beauty?' and it was a phrase that would interlard most of his conversation.

Bob was fair-haired, and his golden moustache, worn walrus-wise, was one in which he took a pride, and I can still see him smoothing it back with a plump finger. His face was plump too and the colour of a mellowed brick wall. In his old sulky he would travel miles each day buying anything from a sitting hen to a sow and litter, and under his pig-net they would go and either to the market to be sold for a profit or placed with a private customer, for Bob was both liked and trusted.

In those days our jokes were homely and crude and Bob gave his name to a disease, or should I call it an indisposition? One hot summer he and his very large family had for supper some cold rabbit pie, and with disastrous internal results. As there was only one tiny privy at the end of the garden—and a single-seater at that—there was much congestion of traffic and in the black of night. Bob related the affair so often and so intimately and to the whole parish that thereafter we had our own name for diarrhoea, and that was 'Bob's Disease'.

But there is quite a different story that I must tell of Bob and it is so incredible that I have to assure you of its implicit truth. It happened in the spring of 1918 when the regiment to which I was temporarily attached was lying in front of Gaza. Freddy Montagu, Air Minister in the first Labour Government and still an important public figure, was in the same regiment with me, and if he reads this there will be much that he remembers.

One day when I had ridden to Dir Sineid to fetch the men's pay, Smiler, my pony, was suddenly restless and sniffing the air. Then in the distance I saw a string of camels approaching. There were about two score of them and loaded with the

metal containers that brought chlorinated water up the line. The camels were in pairs, each pair attached to the pair ahead, and leading them by a long rope was a single British soldier. We passed fairly close for there were deep wadis each side of the track. Then the soldier looked at me and gave a free and easy salute and his face seemed vaguely familiar. Then his eyes opened wide.

'Whuh, how are ye, m'old beauty?'

'Good God!' I said, and couldn't believe my eyes. 'How the devil did you get out here, Bob? You must be well over sixty!'

'Never see sixty no more,' he told me as he wrung my hand. 'Shaved my moustache off, that's what I did, and told 'em I was thirty-five.' He winked. 'I got through all right. Then they rumbled me out in France and sent me over here. Now I'm in charge o' these here camels.'

I dismounted and we must have talked for a good quarter of an hour, but it was news of the village that we principally exchanged. Then Bob said he'd have to be drawin along, and again we shook hands.

'Well, fare ye well, m'old beauty,' he said, but on his face was Heathley and home. Then we moved on. A minute or two and I drew Smiler to a halt and in the distance I could just see the camels, and though I tried to smile at Bob and his topee and his khaki shorts, it was of Heathley that I was thinking too. And now I am thinking of something else: something that might also be a kind of epitaph: something that Ibsen once wrote: 'It's not the breeches but the man in the breeches that counts.'





Chapter XII

HEATHLEY WOMEN

IN these days of small families, incredibly high standards of living, innumerable amenities, and distractions to be had for a few pence, I have often wondered how modern women of my mother's standing would fare if they could be suddenly dumped down in some Heathley of fifty years ago. It was true that on washing days there might be a woman to help, but for most of the time my mother would be alone with a family to feed and even to clothe, for many of our garments were home-made or adapted to suit a younger child. There was a house to keep clean, and though my mother would never acknowledge the sin of house-pride, there were no rooms more spotless in the parish. The visits of Mrs. Pardon were never announced and yet whenever she visited our living-room she would comment on the uncanny cleanliness of the brick floors, the sense of homeliness imparted by polished grate and brass candlesticks, and the touch of beauty from the flowers which, except in winter, would fill the large bowl that always stood on the living-room table.

I mention my mother only as a representative of most. In winter she would be up at six and in summer at dawn, and when I kissed her good-night she would be busy with patching and darning. For her even Sunday was no day of rest. It is true that sometimes she would drive Grey Jack or Tom in the sulky to visit some old acquaintance on the heaths, but that was a rare event. Sometimes she would read over her darning, and I recall *Mrs. Haliburton's Troubles*, or something

by Marie Corelli or Mrs. Henry Wood. My father's favourite, I might mention, was Hardy, and it was *The Trumpet Major* that appealed to him most. Once a month perhaps she would go out to tea, and on some winter afternoons she would play draughts with Mr. Fowler—as we always spoke of him—who was the father of Mrs. Field.

I can still see old Fowler, a tall, gaunt man with a thin grey beard; of superior education and London-bred. What I recall most are the red mittens that he always wore and he could manipulate them so cunningly that when he moved a man forward with his finger, he could catch an end in a man behind and move it forward too. Although my mother was aware of this cheating she would only rarely be moved to protest that surely such a man oughtn't to be there, and then Fowler would admonish her for her forgetfulness. Two other things that I remember could not be related in most drawing-rooms. One was the occasion when he rose to go and his malacca walking-stick with the ivory handle could nowhere be found. Never was such a mystery, for there had been no callers and the only other soul in the house was a small toddler of four. Then when Fowler had gone, the stick was found, its handle protruding from the top of the bumby-hole. What strange and almost Satanic impulse had moved my small sister to put it there was never known. The other occasion was when Fowler rose to go one afternoon and a button fell from the back of his trousers. My mother sewed it on. Later that evening strange cries were heard coming from the Field privy. In her haste my mother had sewn that button to the old man's shirt.

My mother will often tell me that those days when her children were young were the happiest of her life, and even though now she has ease and leisure and ample means for her still simple tastes. And I imagine that most of her contemporaries would be of the same mind. As for her interests, or what I might call distractions, they were shared by most women of the village. One was the replenishing of our store of rag rugs, and these she would make on a winter evening. All that was needed was a sugar-bag of good quality hessian and through it would be threaded strips of coloured rags to make a pattern, and so hard-wearing would those rugs be that they could be handed down from mother to daughter.

It is not only in these modern days that there are coupons

and free gifts as inducements to buy a particular article. Fifty years ago there was Bonus Tea, and if a housewife saved so many paper wrappings she could obtain in exchange a quantity of articles that ranged from vases to rocking-chairs, and I remember the eagerness with which my mother would look forward to the obtaining of some special piece of furniture or decoration for the best room. In the window of that best room would be flowers in pots, and all the windows of our village cottages would look like gardens. I remember that Mary Balfour had the best geraniums in the village, but we had something that was unique—a campanula that hung in a pot at the very top of the bay window, with blooms that trailed down to meet the pink of geraniums and the blue and mauve of primulas. At the Flower Show there would always be prizes for the best pot plants and for years that campanula would take a prize.

My mother's cooking was perfection and by that I mean that while it still had a quality and a daintiness, it never lost sight of the fact that it was the quantity that mattered. Her short crust would melt in the mouth. Bread she had no time to make, but for a special Sunday or birthday she would make the cheese-cakes for which she was famous. Maybe you make them just as well, and all I know of them is this, that the pastry filling was made with ground rice and butter and egg and currants. We children never ate those cheese-cakes but would nibble them like mice, and on our plates would be left never a single crumb.

When meat happened to be short she had her own methods for a midday meal. She would so announce that we were having bread and cheese for a first course that it would sound to us like a delightful treat, and when there was a competition to see who could eat most bread with the smallest piece of cheese, we had no idea that this was all a matter of necessary economy. Then there was her dexterous distribution of a single baked rabbit. A leg and the best part of the back with most of the fat pork would be set aside for my father's tea. She herself might have the other leg and after that there was not much left for six. But she would assure us that the two tastiest parts of a rabbit were the head and the neck, and those who did not receive those favoured joints felt themselves fobbed off with merely the ribs or a shoulder.

I think too that those Heathley women must have been a

hardier race. I never remember hearing of a still-born child or a death in childbirth, though the doctor could rarely arrive till the task of the midwife was over. Was it because or in spite of the fact that they married young? My own mother was a mother at eighteen. And after childbirth a woman would be back at work in a day or two. I remember being told that my mother would spend under a week in bed and then be about the work of the house again. Nor do I remember a baby that was not breast-fed. And there could be no coddling of minor complaints, for the village had no telephone and to fetch a doctor meant putting a horse in a cart and a six-mile drive each way.

As for the fashions these were usually a year at least behind those that prevailed in London. From the dressmaker or from Robert Addis one could obtain a book of fashions, and I remember how my mother would have a conference with a friend or two and a certain style, colour, material, and trimmings would be at last selected. Then would come the visit to the dressmaker—and my mother's, as I have said, lived four miles away—and another visit for trying on, and then a final visit when the finished creation was collected. Such a dress would last my mother two years, and would then be taken in for a second best.

With the older women a best dress would last many years and I only remember one occasion when Granny Shaw was wearing something new. And one last thing I should say of my mother, and it is as important as any. Her daughters were brought up with no foolish snobberies or pride. They cooked, made and mended—and the fact that one might be attending Ouseland Grammar School for Girls was no exemption from scrubbing a brick floor.

Granny Shaw—the name was a courtesy one—was between sixty and seventy: a plump little old lady, all dimples and chuckles. She was of that older generation of village women who still curtsied to the Reverend and the Squire, though the gesture had become a kind of quick bob.

Shaw, her husband, I hated. He had a patrician cast of countenance—clean-shaven face and hooked nose—and was the most rabid Tory in the parish, as befitted the Squire's coachman and that of his father before him. On election days he would appear with a huge red sash and a red band

round his official hat, and at the slightest opportunity he would call for three cheers for this one and that. But I hated him principally because he told tales to my father. When the pony was kept at Lammis Meadows it would be my duty to fetch him up each morning in the summer, and as I could ride bareback anything across which I could get my legs, I would come home at a full gallop. According to Shaw this was a danger to village life and limb.

But we all loved Granny. She had a tiny cottage but my mother would always say that you could eat a meal off any of its spotless floors. In that cottage, too, were the most marvellous things which we would be shown when we were allowed to call. In addition to innumerable Staffordshire ornaments there was the usual ship fully rigged in a bottle, and a glass paper-weight which had a cottage inside and when the glass was shaken the cottage and its garden and trees were obscured by a snow-storm. And Granny was the first to possess a stereoscope and a set of pictures at which to look. I still cannot fathom how she managed to come into possession of such a treasure, as indeed it seemed to us, but when she called it would be the first thing we would ask if she had brought.

One Sunday night I was allowed to stay away from Chapel for I had bad chilblains. When feeding bullocks I had to handle frozen beet and my fingers would split, and cracks would open across my palms, and these would be dressed with turpentine. My mother stayed with me and Granny went to chapel instead. She came back with the family and into the best room, where I politely asked her if she would have one of my sweets. Granny took a sniff round the room.

'No, thank you, my dear,' she said. 'I've never tasted turpentine sweets.'

It was Granny who had brought all of us, and scores of other Heathley babies into the world. I do not know if I was at all proud of my looks and needed a taking down, but it was she who told me, and my mother later confirmed it, that I was the ugliest baby ever known, for I had a head so large that people would stop my perambulator and ask to look at me. But to me she will always be the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, with her wheezes and chuckles and endless gossip, and I often wonder what were those intimacies of innuendo that would make my mother shake her head and blush.

In our village were only two reputed witches and these had degenerated into curers of warts. To me that process was and is a mystery. All I know is that my warts were shown to Martha Bunnett, who didn't even touch them, and yet within a very few days they were gone.

In my father's youth there was supposed to be a desperate witch who lived in a cottage at the back of Vicarage Road. One Guy Fawkes Night, the 'them chaps' of those days fastened the old woman's door, stacked her great pile of faggots against her pigsty and then set fire to the sere wood. A man galloped to Harford for the police and they arrived just in time to stop a fire which a spark had kindled on the old woman's thatch. She was still living when I came back to Heathley and I remember her as a bent old woman, and very lame, and when I once ventured to wish her good-morning, just to see what happened, she answered me in so gentle a voice that thereafter I refused to believe she had ever been a witch at all.

But of Martha—*alias* Pat—Bunnett, we were always somewhat scared. If you should have an illustrated copy of *King Solomon's Mines*, you can see a portrait of Martha, for she was the image of Gagool. Her cottage was on the Harford Road, next to Granny Shaw, and she had been housekeeper for a retired cobbler of the name of Whiterod. When 'them chaps' met her they would politely address her as Mrs. Bunnett. When she was safely past they would call her Pat, and when at a perfectly safe distance, it would be Mrs. Whiterod, and Pat would turn round and scowl and shake her stick.

I never saw the point of that last innuendo, and it might have been as well for me if I had. For one day a tumbler of ours was going after beet to Lammas Meadows and I went with the man. On the homeward journey the tumbler was full and so I rode with my legs clinging to one of the rear horns. Near the village we passed Pat, and the devil whispered to me that I might try calling, 'Good morning, Mrs. Whiterod!'

A few yards on the tumbler stopped. I had forgotten all about Pat and was waiting for it to move on. Then something felled me to the ground, and a voice said, 'I'll larn ye to call me Mrs. Whiterod!' Then appalled by what she had done, the old woman hurried away. But the blow of her

stick on my skull had been a glancing one and in a minute or two I got to my feet. The man reported the occurrence to my father, who ran an eye over me, and felt the bump.

'No,' he said critically. 'I don't think I shall give you a hiding. I reckon Martha have about done that for me.'

For months after that I would avoid her neighbourhood, for *Woodstock* had told me about charms and incantations. Then she died and I was vastly relieved. My father, the Reverend, and old men of the village had a conference to determine what date should be put on the name-plate of her coffin and on the necessary documents, for no records could be found. They finally compromised by making her ninety-five, but my father always insisted that she was over a hundred, and, from what I remember, his evidence proved it.

Quite near to Martha Bunnett lived the Phryne of the village, a buxon woman and full-breasted, and her name was Jemima Crow. I was dimly aware that there was something different about her for my mother did not like her name to be mentioned, and I remember how a sister was sharply reprovèd for asking how it was that Mrs. Crow—which was her courtesy title—could have a baby when she wasn't married. I don't know what the women of the village thought privately about her, but she would always be greeted as one of themselves, with a: 'Good mornin, Mima,' and Mima would give as cheerful a good-morning. Nor did the men greet her with an ogle or leer when they met her on her way back from a day's house-work at some farm. It would be, 'Evenin, Mima,' and, 'Evenin, George bor,' just as with you and me.

I remember two of her childten. One was a good-looking girl who left the village and became a lady's maid. The other was weak in her wits. In strange garments cut down from those of earlier generations, and with skirts that dragged in the dust, she would walk our lanes and roads. Her face was that of a young madonna; her complexion the palest white, and her dark expressive eyes had a faery look in which was a perpetual bewilderment. When one spoke to her, her lips would faintly stir and no more, and she would move on as if rapt in thought. I have often wondered of what it was that she would be thinking, and for the life of me I cannot think of a village man who might have been her father, and it was a thing that even Mima would never reveal.

In Heathley was much gypsy blood and the Smiths were

our strongest clan. Dealing was in their blood, and one of the oldest women in the village was the widow of a dickey dealer named Smith, though the village nicknamed her Diddykai, the nickname common to all gypsies. She was a venerable figure even in age, with jet-black hair, tanned face, and piercing eyes.

Now my father had a sister much older than himself, and once or twice she came to stay with us. She died at the great age of ninety, and on the occasion of her *contretemps* was probably about sixty. But for some reason or other she imagined herself the grand custodian of Heathley history and the great lady of the parish, and in her walks she would smile graciously at this one and condescend to inquire after that. Then one day she saw old Mrs. Smith entering Robert Addis's shop and asked who she was, and the answer had an element of truth. So into the shop went Aunt Honor and to Mrs. Smith she extended a high-lifted hand.

'How do you do, Mrs. Diddykai?'

The old woman glared, then dashed the hand aside. What she said we never knew but Aunt Honor came home with flaming cheeks.

Then there was George Dew's wife. Of all the village women she was the most inquisitive, and when she entered the forge to ask questions of a man who might be waiting while a horse was shod or roughed, George would lose patience. Then one day when the family was having dinner, who should go by the window but Squire Harvey of Illboro, and as usual riding a horse.

'Whuh, what's he a-doin on here?' asked Sabina Dew. 'Wonder where he've been to?'

That straw broke the camel's back. George sprang to his feet, opened the front door which was on the road, and hurried after Harvey. The Squire drew his horse up and George flicked his forelock.

'You'll excuse me, sir, but Bina—my wife—want to know where you've been to and what you're a-doin on?'

'Oh!' said Harvey. 'Then tell her I've been to the vicarage and am now going back home.'

'Thankee, sir,' said George, and made his way home with the information. But the village roared at that and though it did not shorten Sabina's tongue, George's own stature was mightily increased.

The village had its butts and laughing-stocks. One was that farmer's wife who aped a refinement, and twice she gave the village cause for chuckling. One occasion was when she attended a cricket match in which her husband was playing. The end of an over and the repeated crossings were beyond her, but at last she turned to a neighbour and remarked, 'I see they're all out again'.

The second occasion was when some women were invited to the vicarage to do some charity sewing, and were given tea. Mrs. Pardon presided at the tea-table and by chance when the tea was poured, Lucy Ford was forgotten. Mrs. Pardon apologized and began pouring another cup. Lucy waited till the cup was just over half full and then leaned forward. Her lips puckered to utter the necessary refinement, up went her forefinger, and she uttered a 'Whoa!' And even that was pronounced, 'Whoo.'

It is purely by chance that all the women I have mentioned were Church, but there are three Methodist women of whom I would like to tell you. Sarah Till—Josh's wife—was a woman of warm and impulsive generosity, and of children she was particularly fond. Never did a boy pass her door in the season but he would be given an apple or plums or green-gages. To treats and chapel tea-meetings she would bring her best crockery and we loved her cakes. And then Sarah Till did something that puzzled me.

A pig was being killed in Josh's yard and I had gone there, hoping to be given the bladder. When the pig was hauled from the scalding tub to the trestle and Josh was about to use the scraping knife, Sarah suddenly called, 'Wipe you that shit from that pig's arse, Josh, or you'll datty your trousers.'

To my mother I said in a horrified whisper, 'Mother, Mrs. Till swears!'

'Nonsense,' said my mother, and smiled at the very idea.

Then I explained, and I remember the frown at the vulgarity. And I received a rare dressing-down for repeating such words.

I mention that episode because it is concerned with something that has never ceased to interest and annoy me. I hate a minced and precious English, as Milton hated a fugitive and cloistered virtue. In my young mouth such words would

have been improper and in my mother's incredible. And yet I do not know. In Chaucer's time they were current and seemly, and I wonder through what generations of remote and simple ancestry Sarah received them, so that in her mouth they were not only seemly but somehow inevitable.

That great image of which Nebuchadnezzar dreamed had a *belly* of brass, but the word is now only an innuendo for comedians. But for the life of me I cannot see why a part of the human body should be ennobled by a new, fine-sounding name. The Norman-French of *privy* and *closet* has given place to *lavatory*. Maybe I shall live to hear muck called ordure, and yet there is a consolation. Though I may be debarred from using the language of the earth in a drawing-room, there will be nothing to debar me from an earthy English in the fields. The other Sunday I was reading a critic for whom I have a great respect and liking, and he was lamenting that we had no Zola. If he meant the Zola of *Thérèse Raquin*, *La Terre* and *L'Assommoir*, then he will end his days in both regret and lamentation, for that English Zola and his publisher would be ruinously fined in a court of law for what would be deemed obscenities.

I have mentioned young Tom Francis and his prodigious memory. He lived with his grandmother in a cottage down Vicarage Road and my mother would often visit her. She was very old and had a voice of remarkable shrillness, and I remember her once remarking, on the occasion of a Foresters' Dance in the school, 'They'll dance their selves to hell. I know they will.'

Tom was somewhat of a simpleton. Just before his grandfather died—and he worked till the week of his death—Tom remarked one morning, 'Granfer, I've got your boots all ready for you.' 'That's a good boy,' the old man said, for he was late and in rather a hurry. But when he went to put the boots on, they were laced all ready and even the knots were tied.

It was Tom's feat to coin a new Heathley word, if only an onomatopoeic one. My mother arrived at the cottage door one afternoon to hear this brief conversation. Old Granny Francis was cleaning a window and Tom didn't like her methods.

'You'll never get it clean like that, Granny,' he told her.

'Oh?' she said. 'And what's wrong, pray, with the way I'm a-doin on't?'

'You want to *boob* on't,' said Tom, and took the duster and showed her how.

But the story my mother will tell begins on a day when she called to see the old lady. She seemed in high spirits and imparted the news in her shrill treble that that gal Mary was goin to have that young man, and she'd thought so herself all along.

Mother asked no questions but she did mention the matter to my father. He knew the Francis history, but think back as he might he could not place the Mary. Then he remembered that there had been a niece, and perhaps the Mary was her daughter and a great-niece. So when my mother called the following week she asked the latest news about Mary.

'They're married,' the old lady said, and her cackle of a laugh filled the room. 'I allust knew she'd have him. A rare grand weddin it was.'

'It's a pity you couldn't have been there,' remarked my mother, and, 'Is it a long while since you saw her?'

Then the truth came out. The old lady had been reading a serial story in the *Sunday Companion*.

My one unforgettable Heathley woman was one who came to live in Heathley and was a London woman born. She was the elder sister of Robert Grinter's wife and she had been living in a London suburb. Then her husband died suddenly and left her penniless and with two young children. Grinter took them all in and was like a father to the girls.

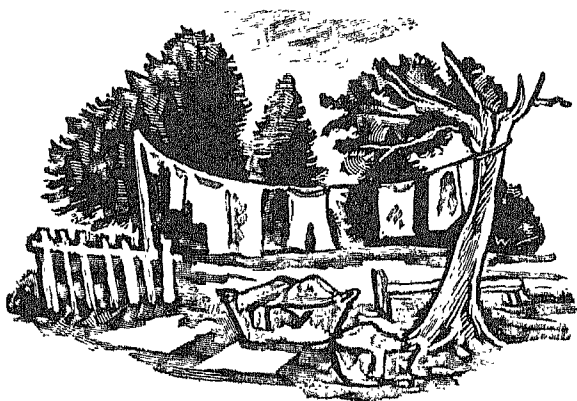
To me, when I came back to Heathley, Aunt Polly, as we always knew her, was an elderly woman, for she had always imagined that in return for the keep of herself and the children she should take the place of a servant in Grinter's house. So she would never hear of help in the house or bakery or an assistant in the little shop but made of herself—and in spite of Grinter's protestations—a veritable household drudge. From dawn to dusk you would never see her but at work, and after dark you might hear her drawing a bucket of water from the well.

But if you had pointed out to her that she was a drudge, she would have smiled and shaken her head reprovingly. My mother would sometimes say, 'Aunt Polly you oughtn't to

work so hard,' and then she would look surprised, and my mother would be left shaking her head over her. And yet Aunt Polly would somehow find time to sit up with those who were ill, and whatever the weather and however few the congregation for a week-night service, she would be one.

To me she was always tiny and very frail, and I can see her face as if it were now before me. It was a face on which one could read a lifetime. Once it must have been beautiful, and though the years had withered and wrinkled it, they had failed to take from it its gentleness and a strange purity. To see that face for the first time might bring a kind of surprise, and then would come a warming of the heart, for it was the visible imprint of a lowly and upright soul.

In her eyes there was always an inward smile, and though in chapel she would never pray, yet her life was both prayer and sermon, and Josh Till could not have bettered the one nor Doran the other. I remember my mother reading a book called *God's Good Man*. Aunt Polly was God's Good Woman.





Chapter XIII

POACHING

I HOPE this heading has not misled you, for I have nothing to tell of bloody affrays between poachers and keepers: indeed, the chapter might have been headed *A Friendly Guide to Friendly Poaching*. But my father would often tell me of the poaching in his youth—he was much older than my mother, by the way—and how the poachers and roughs of Ouseland would drive about the country in carts and wagonettes, and in such numbers and with such bravado that every keeper would remain in his cottage while they played what Breckland called ‘the very dāvul’!¹

Dodger Lake, I was told, had been the most noted of Heathley poachers and I believe had spent a week or two in jail. A village story was current that Dodger was chased one night by keepers but managed to reach his cottage with no more time than to throw his air-gun down his well, from which he hoped subsequently to retrieve it. But the well was deep and the creepers had nothing on which to bite. Many years later I came into possession of that cottage and there were reasons why I had to clean out the well. But there was never a sign of a rusted air-gun, though we did retrieve such curiosities as a pair or two of pattens and some brass snuffers in quite good condition.

And yet the story might well have been true, for Dodger was an old and experienced poacher. It was he who told me about the use of bird-lime before strict penalties were imposed on its use. The method was to make small paper cones and

¹ Devil.

smear the insides with bird-lime and place a few grains of corn in the bottom. The cones would be left conveniently in some ride where pheasants were plentiful. Naturally they would peck at the corn, thrusting their heads well into the cone to get at it, and then would be blinded and helpless. Whenever Dodger would tell me about the successful use of that particular artifice, what would strike him most was the remembrance of pheasants staggering about with the cones over their heads and it would make him so laugh and chuckle that he would almost choke himself with his quid.

There was another trick which Dodger taught me. When stacks were thrashed you could be certain of finding a few pheasants searching for grain among the chaff and waste, and the method of catching them was to bait an ordinary plate-trap with a grain or two of barley. But Dodger told me an ingenious variation. A wind might blow the barley off the plate, for instance, so it was better to smear the plate with hot pitch and, before it set, to drop the grains of barley on it. That gave two excellent advantages. The grains of corn were there for ever and the trap could be used over and over again: moreover the black of the pitch against the lighter chaff would invariably attract the attention of a pheasant. Strange, you may say, that such ingenuity should be so misapplied!

There were five reasons why Heathley men should be poachers and it might be not uninteresting to deal with them one by one. The first is easily disposed of, for poaching was in the Heathley blood. In the bad old days, about which my father told me, as you may remember, at the Top Breck, the fathers and grandfathers of the Heathley of my boyhood had poached because they were starving men, and neither jail nor transportation had deterred them.

The second reason is equally comprehensible. A Heathley labourer of fifty years ago would normally have a large family and from the data in a previous chapter you may have worked out his budget. But pheasants were not for him. The penalties were too severe if he were caught—jail followed by eviction, for he had no money to pay a fine—and he had neither the gun nor the technique for pheasant poaching. But rabbits and hares swarmed everywhere and if his cottage

were away from the village they would infest his garden. His method then was to put down snares at dusk and take up before dawn. And those labourers must have been masters of that particular craft, for I can recall no more than one or two who were caught. Finch, I should have said, was a magistrate, and when such a case came before the Harford bench he would take no hand in it.

Poaching was also a means of making money. When a man saw a rabbit or hare he saw not only a meal on four legs but he saw also the sum of eightpence or half a crown, which was the price a travelling dealer would pay. But labourers did not poach for purposes of sale. Close your eyes then for a moment, and try to guess who it was that poached for profit. I give only two answers and the first may astonish you. It was the keepers who poached and made money, and so did I. But I do not think that money was a primary motive with my father.

The next reason was a wish to get even with squires and game laws, and there was one of my father's motives. Consider that land of ours known as Lammas Meadows. Finch was the landlord, but Green was also his tenant for the game, and compared with my father's comparatively few pounds of rent was Green's hundreds of pounds for tenancy and shooting rights. Lammas Meadows was almost surrounded by woods including the sacrosanct Park. On a ride of one of those woods would be hundreds of young pheasants which had been brought there from their foster-mothers and were fed each morning and evening by a keeper. But a pheasant is also a forager, so pheasants and rabbits and hares would infest our corn, and to-day I can say that a sober estimate would give the loss as well over half the crop.

Naturally my father complained to Finch and the rent was reduced, but far from accordingly. If my father had been given a free hand he could have entered the woods and, without unduly disturbing pheasants, have eradicated the rabbits. Finally he had to complain to Green who would do no more than surround that one particular wood with wire netting. My father's comments were cynical and forcible. Within a few days of the erection of that wire the rabbits had made paths, roads, and even turnpikes under it, and the pheasants flew over it. If then you have been inclined to regard my father as a curious species of Methodist I trust

you will no longer include poaching among his supposed hypocrisies.

Finally there was pure love of sport and that was my father's primary reason for poaching. It was my own main reason too and I hope to prove that to call night-netting a thrilling sport is far from exaggeration.

What my father had done before I arrived in the village I do not know, but I do know that shortly after my arrival he had a tremendous stroke of luck. A certain farmer named Pettitt came to him and asked if he might use his rabbit nets. Pettitt had land adjoining our own, but my father was averse, and from reasons you will later hear, to lending his nets and he therefore suggested that he should accompany Pettitt. Pettitt was delighted at the offer for he knew my father's skill in night netting and there would be, moreover, the use of Nell, our famous bitch. It was one of Pettitt's own fields that was going to be netted and so this was no matter of poaching.

A suitable night arrived and Pettitt and my father set off. But as they came round the corner of the wood my father seemed to hear the sound of a running dog and Nell had given a peculiar sort of tremor beneath his hand. He grasped Pettitt's arm.

'Charlie, someone's ahead of us!'

'Whuh, who could it be?' whispered Pettitt.

There was a quick council of war. The bitch was tied up and my father went one way and Pettitt the other. As each found the poacher's nets a man came to them in the blackness. It was the head assistant of Field, and two other keepers were with him, and what happened can be imagined, but they begged Pettitt not to confiscate their nets or to breathe a word to Field. But Pettitt was obdurate and took both the nets and the rabbits that had been caught and he told them that in the morning he would go direct to Green.

Very early the following morning my father called on him.

'Well, Charlie, what are you goin to do about last night?'

'What am I goin to do? Go to Green, of course. Goin to get them lot the sack.'

'Hold you your whip,' my father told him. 'If that lot gets sacked we may get a worse lot, and what good would it do you or me?'

'What do you think of doin then?'

'Give you me back them nets o' theirs,' my father said. 'I'll go and sec 'em straightaway.'

One of those keepers, as I have said, worked the Home Woods with Field. One lived opposite the Common and the other at Cranberry, and from then on the three were under the thumb of both my father and Pettitt, and that without threat or word of blackmail! I should add that my father took no undue advantage of that happy position in which he found himself: indeed, it rather took some of the zest from the sport.

Our keepers wore suits of duck-egg green, and when they were discarded you would often see a labourer wearing an old one. Their caps were naturally the twin-peaked ones and their leggings were of the same green cloth. Their coat pockets were large for the carrying of game and you never saw one abroad without a gun. In the wood rides you would see on exhibition the dead enemies of pheasants and their eggs—jays, rats, stoats, and weasels. With the footmen and coachmen at the Hall they formed a village hierarchy of their own.

Field, the head keeper, lived in a cottage just inside the private road to Church and Hall. He was of that short, dark type which showed a far-off Danish ancestry, and on account of his somewhat bandy legs was known as Doddles. For a keeper I know him to have been an honest man, and he had no need of graft and peculation for he must have made a small fortune from his tips alone. He and my father were always friendly, perhaps because their wives were such close friends.

All the keepers were our natural enemies and I learned to know their usual rounds and when it would be safe to visit a forbidden spot. Field I can see as if he were now standing by me, but of the other keepers I remember only one, a man named Eagle, and his beat included the Plains. He was to be avoided therefore when we frequented those brecks in a search for the eggs of curlews and lapwings.

One summer day my particular crony and I decided to go wading in a pit on the Plains. This particular friend of mine—of the same age as myself, which would then be about ten years—was the grandson of old Jeremiah Edwards who made his money at the *Lion*, and his own name was the impressive one of Thomas Augustus Jeremiah Edwards. That afternoon

Tom and I had finished our wading and drying and were just completing our dressing when I happened to remark somewhat loudly, 'It'd be a rum thing, wouldn't it, if old Eagle was to catch us now?'

'You needn't worry about old Eagle,' said a voice, and there he was, not twenty yards from us. In a flash we were running, and by the shortest way, to the Puddledock lane with Eagle lumbering at our heels. But the way was barred by a deep drain some eight foot wide and filled with thick yellow slime. I was lucky for I happened to get a good take off and my feet just caught the far side. Tom hesitated on the brink and was lost. His jump landed him in the middle and almost up to the neck, and I dragged him out. There was no need to worry about Eagle for the tears were rolling down his cheeks. And no wonder, for so coated was Tom with that slime that not a vestige of clothing was visible and we spent the rest of the afternoon in drying him out and scraping his clothes with our shut-knives.

Another thing I should add about those three keepers is that they would request my father's co-operation in the disposal of their poached rabbits, and it would be their rabbits that I would see in the shed and which Bensley Thorpe would fetch away in the dark of night. Live and let live was the motto.

I am so hopeful that you will take an interest in night-netting that I would like to describe it in considerable detail. It was of different sorts, for if one netted on one's own ground it could not be classed as poaching. But the method was the same in either case, and with or without the fear of keepers.

First then the essentials for the job. The nets we knew as silk nets, for they were valuable and expensive, and of finer material than those used in warrening, and so light that, when folded, an eighty-yard length would go into a coat pocket. At top and bottom were what were known as the reins on which the net ran free, and when the nets were set in the pitch dark one held the top rein between the fingers and so could feel when a rabbit struck the net, and long experience would even tell you its exact location.

Stout hazel stakes supported the net, one to every seven or eight yards. A stake had a sharpened end and from the last two inches of the top the bark was removed and that gave a

kind of whiteness which one could see in the dark. The stakes would be driven into the ground at an angle towards you and a rein looped round the top. The net was not taut and a hang of eighteen inches was ample height. My father could set up two full lengths of netting within five minutes on the darkest night.

The next essential was a trained dog, and we had the finest that was ever known in Breckland. She was a little brindled bitch of the name of Nell, not rough like a lurcher but with ample greyhound blood. Her deeds were legendary and an Ouseland man once offered my father twenty pounds for her.

'Not if you filled these two hands with sovereigns,' said my father and laughed scornfully, and the man, like one of old, went sorrowfully away.

Nell had the heart of a lion and an incredible sagacity and with children she was soft and gentle. When she was killed in an accident my mother and we children sobbed for hours and I know my father was deeply affected. If Nell sniffed at a hole and went away there was no need to put in a ferret for it was a certainty that no rabbit was there. Her mouth was so soft that when she brought a rabbit its fur would be scarcely wetted. Stern disciplinarian as my father was with dogs, forbidding all coddling and patting, he would sometimes pat her ribs and give what was for him an amazing encomium.

'Good lil old bitch,' he would say, and give his sideways nod of the head.

So trained was Nell in night-netting that she knew every move of the game and could drive a rabbit in the inkiest black to within a yard of the net.

'Bast!' my father would hiss. 'She'll have the net down!'

But she never did. With some uncanny movement of her body and at headlong speed she would pivot in a foot of space. The net would be left clear and she would be flashing back to drive another rabbit.

Another essential was to choose the right night and the direction of the wind. The best field was a young clover with a wood behind it, and the wind would have to be something of a gale and blowing from the wood and down the field. Near dusk the rabbits would emerge from the wood and by nine or ten o'clock would have left it far behind. The night too would have to be one of pitch darkness, but so sensitive were the rabbits to sound that every movement

would be careful, for even the gale would scarcely suffice to drown the faint knock of one net stake against another. As for the minimum number of men needed, they would be one for each length of netting and one for the dog.

The right night has come and we have two lengths of netting which will be sufficient for the field in hand. My mother thinks I am in bed and asleep, but my father gives a low whistle up the other stairs and I join him and Dodger and I who lead the bitch. Near the rendezvous we split up and we imagine it is Dodger who takes over the dog. My father and I move down to the wood edge and there the wind howls and roars and I know that at any moment a bough or even a tree may crash down. The nets are set out and I crouch at one net, the top rein between my fingers, and my father is at the other. Then he takes a box of matches from his pocket and strikes a match. The wind at once blows out the flame but in the far distance Dodger has seen the flash and with a 'Hie on, old bitch!' he lets Nell go. She traverses that field from hedge to hedge in wide sweeps and each sweep brings her slowly nearer to the net. We hear the scamper of the first rabbit and hold our breath. It strikes. The whole net shakes and one of us runs quickly to the spot. In a flash the rabbit is disentangled from the net, its neck is broken and it is thrown clear. Then if we are in luck the rabbits come fast. Sometimes there are so many that my father fears the nets will be broken down. I have known as many as sixty rabbits caught in a single night and there were some that got away when a net was sagged down.

Then at last it is over and Dodger comes up and whispers in the dark.

'How'd you get on, together?'

'Not too bad,' is my father's invariable remark. He has no time for even a whisper, for he and I are getting up the nets and tying the stakes together. Dodger is huttling the rabbits and we have brought stout poles on which the legs are threaded. Then he and my father stagger off in the dark and I behind them with the bitch. It will be midnight when we reach home and the shirts of the two men will be sodden with perspiration. But there are still the rabbits to hulk, and then the shed door is locked. Word will reach Bensley and the next night those rabbits will have gone.

And all I will add is this. Was my claim justified that

night-netting was more than money and its mere thrill a sufficient reward?

Once more I will speak of myself and only because I must have been typical of many a Heathley farmer's son of fifty years ago. I remember my first shot with a gun. I could not have been more than nine years old and it must have been after that encounter with the three keepers, or else that shot would never have been fired so near the Park. But my father and I were walking down Little Heathley Lane when we met Pettitt with a gun beneath his arm. While my elders were talking I saw a pheasant in a field of mangolds and drew my father's attention to it.

'Let the boy have a shot,' said Pettitt, and put the empty gun to my shoulder and showed me how to sight and pull the trigger. Then he loaded it. I rested the gun on the hedge top and, trembling with excitement, aimed and fired. The kick knocked me backwards but I hit my pheasant, though it was some sixty yards away.

'Let it lie till it get dark,' said Pettitt, and that was my initiation into what might be called poaching.

But when I went to Ouseland there were school expenses of which my parents could never dream, and as I could not always let others pay for me, it was essential that I should have money in my pocket. But how to raise it I had no idea until I thought of poaching, at which I had long been an adept. Once I set out alone with Nell and a length of netting. Nell was tied to the far hedge, then I moved on and set the nets. Then I sprinted back and let Nell free and then had to run to my nets again. I think I got four or five rabbits and sold them to Tash for the usual eightpence apiece. The net was replaced but I had forgotten something which my father was always most careful to do—remove all twigs that might hinder the free setting of a net in the dark of night or tear the valuable mesh. A day or so later my father told me to follow him into the quiet of the best room.

'Have you been usin one of my nets?'

'Yes, father.'

He rubbed his chin and nodded.

'Next time you use one, mind you clean it before you put it away. That's all I wanted you for.' And with no more words he left the room and me.

But after that I tried no more netting by myself. What I would do was take his gun and dismantle it. The barrel would go down the leg of my trousers and the stock and the action in pockets from which I had slit the linings. Then I would make for Lammas Meadows and far beyond and always with the stealthiness of a Red Indian. From behind a hedge or in a fold of ground I would stalk a sitting rabbit. The gun would be reassembled and I would aim at the head. Then in a flash the rabbit would be in my hand and I would be in the wood again and stripping the gun. Then I would move elsewhere at top speed in case a keeper should have heard the shot. I would often get four or five rabbits in an evening and Tash would buy my catch.

One happening, for it was unusual, comes vividly to my mind. The school was due to play a cricket match at Ely and I was in desperate need of five shillings for railway fare and expenses. So I took the gun as usual and set off, but for some reason or other it was rather late. Then in one of the Squire's meadows just beyond our land, I saw the pricked ears of a hare, so I assembled the gun and began to stalk her on my belly. Fifty yards beyond me was a fold of ground from which a shot would kill the hare, and it must have taken me ten good minutes to crawl to it. Dusk was in the sky and when I peeped above the grass the hare had moved out of distance though I could see her plainly enough. To crawl farther was impossible and there almost within range was a needed half-crown. There was nothing to do, however, but to crawl back and go home, and then suddenly another hare came from the wood and my first hare came moving towards it and just within range. The dusk was now so close that I could scarcely see her, but I took a chance and fired the choke barrel. She gave a leap and fell dead. And then the most amazing thing happened. The second hare did not bolt back into the wood but came ambling towards the dead hare as if to see what had happened. I gave him the other barrel, and for those two hares Tash gave me my five shillings. Each was clean shot and never was twopence—the cost of the cartridges—so luckily invested.

But though I prided myself that such poachings were unknown and that I had achieved a mantle of invisibility, Field must from time to time have caught sight of me. But he never spoke to me directly or to my father. His method

was to speak to his wife and she would see my mother. I remember that my mother would be almost in tears and saying that surely I had not done this or that, and I would swear repentance, and it might be a week or two before I was poaching again.

But Field had the laugh of me in the end, and of my brother too. I was about twelve at the time and my brother much older. It was just before Christmas and he was on holiday. Now my father had forgotten to order a Christmas dinner and he was also laid up with a badly sprained ankle which kept him to the house.

'We'll soon see about a Christmas dinner,' my brother told me off-handedly, and though it was broad daylight and the morning of Christmas Eve, he calmly walked down Little Heathley Lane with a gun under his arm. To me such recklessness and lack of planning was incredible. My method was to know the precise beat of a keeper and his times and then to plan in detail my route and my get-away, and half the pleasure of a successful expedition lay in the realization that the time spent on planning had not been wasted.

But my brother made straight for the far Park and near that ride where the pheasants would be found to be plentiful. There was a faint brush of snow on the ground and by a stack across from the Park we saw three or four pheasants. Without more ado my brother drew me behind him and moved behind a hedge until they were within range and then loosed off both barrels. The two birds, both cocks, were picked up and my brother proceeded calmly to walk home, the pheasants in his pockets. Then I happened to glance back—I had given many an anxious glance in the course of those five minutes—and there some two hundred yards away and coming at a trot was Field.

My brother abandoned all dignity and we took to our heels, and hoped the woods concealed us from the pursuing Field. By the time we got to the barn he was almost on us, and as we came through the back way my brother whipped out the two pheasants and covered them with dung. The gun was hidden under a carpenter's bench, and when Field entered we were preparing to cut chaff.

'I suppose you two didn't hear anything of a shot?' Field asked mildly.

'A shot?' said my brother and shook his head.

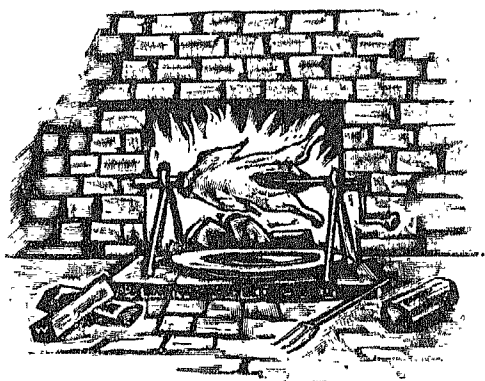
'I suppose you wouldn't mind me havin a look round?' Field went on, and at my brother's shrug of the shoulders he made for the door that led to the dung-yard, and we were at his heels.

And there something met our eyes that made Field double up with helpless laughter. In our haste we had not noticed it, but a sow was loose in that yard and had nosed among the dung. One pheasant was already eaten and the other was being devoured.

Field's face at last straightened.

'After a Christmas dinner, were ye, together?' was what he said, and then started laughing again.

'Well, if one of you come along o' me, I can find you a Christmas dinner,' he said, for at Christmas he would be given pheasants and ducks and fowls to last any man a month. But what he actually gave us was a goose and I remember we roasted it on a spit before the kitchen fire.





Chapter XIV

VILLAGE CRICKET

I APOLOGIZE for beginning this chapter once more with myself, but I see no other way of bringing to your mind the two kinds of cricketers which Breckland knew—those who merely played cricket and those who played strooks.¹

My father loved auctions and especially the buying of job lots for a song. Often he would pick up as many books as a man could carry, and for a shilling. One wet day when I was about nine years old I found a book about cricket, and it was Grace's. It had illustrations for a beginner and at once I was fascinated. Up to then my idea of batting was to hit any ball as hard as possible and in the quickest possible time. Now I learned that every ball could be countered by a particular stroke.

Since I owned the bats with which we boys played and the new gutta-percha ball, I could be something of a tyrant. The bowler would be directed to bowl something on the on or the off and I would practise forward play or the cut. On the leg I was weak all my life but in less than no time I had acquired a flick of the wrist and a late cut that opened Pardon's eyes when he first saw it. Within a year or two it was being said of me that I played strooks, and that put me in the same class as the Reverend. In the book, too, were positions in the field and there was a thrill when the Reverend told me to go to deep mid-wicket or third man, and I could take up my position without asking what he meant. For most of the

¹ cf. Willo. In this case correct *strokes* as played by a player who has been taught the game.

team he would say, 'You take your old place, Jack,' or, 'You'd better field just here.'

But I had always been attracted by cricket. The first summer I arrived in Heathley I saw a match on the Park. It was between the married men and the single, and the outcome I have forgotten. But I do remember that a farmer's top-hat blew off, and on the wicket and dislodged the bails while he was swishing at a ball. What the rules were then I do not know, but out he had to go. I also remember a ball being struck sky-high and a notable catcher named Riddy Church manœuvring into position beneath it. If he and I meet hereafter I shall ask him if he made that catch.

It was the Reverend who suggested I should be tried on the village side and soon I became a fanatic. When I was thirteen I made a score of fifty-eight on the Park and that stood for years as a Heathley record. But what I didn't know was this. After being dropped at least half a dozen times I had made forty odd by tea. Then my father slipped a tip to their bowler who would be first on and asked him to bowl an easy one or two. When I smacked the long hops and full tosses for four I thought I was really a cricketer, but the last ball of that over uprooted my stumps. In that match, too, occurred the strangest accident I have ever known in village cricket. Their wicket-keeper was standing right up to the slowish bowler, and I pulled a leg ball and followed through with such force that my bat laid his eye clean open and he had to be hustled off in a horse and cart to Harford where Soffe stitched up the gash.

On a Friday night in those days I was kept awake by the excitement of anticipation, and as soon as I was awake I would be up and scanning the sky. If it were overclouded, I would be in despair, and if it were fine I would all the morning be looking up for a threat of rain. But the Reverend could beat even that fanaticism. One Saturday we were playing at Ellingham, some seven miles beyond Brackford, and all the morning the rain came down in sheets. So bad was it that even my father knew play would be impossible but he sent me to the vicarage for the Reverend's final verdict.

'Of course we're going,' the Reverend said. 'Start at two o'clock from the Mound.'

On that ride we had tilts¹ and rugs over us, for the rain

¹ Waterproof covers.

had let up never a jot. When we reached Ellingham we found the local team huddled in the tent, and there we all stayed for an hour, for they said the tea would be ready and we might as well eat it. Then, with the rain still teeming down, the Reverend had a look outside, and with him went their umpire for that day—old Jimmy Downs, *alias* Monkey. He was a rare character, with a fringe of whiskers and a simian upper lip, and thirty years later was still umpiring.

‘Think it’s going to clear up, Downs,’ the Reverend said. Downs grunted.

‘Clear up, sir?’ he said. ‘That’s what the davvul said to Noah.’

But clear up it ultimately did, and after tea we had an hour’s cricket.

The method of choosing a Heathley team was simple. John Balfour would put in the Reading Room what was called the List, and it would be headed by the names of the Reverend and Lance if they were able to play. Then members would put down their names, and when the eleven were there, the List would be taken down. It was a system that worked well, for since a labourer had no half-day on a Saturday, the side was nearly always the same. Indeed, if a couple of men fell out, it might be hard to complete the side. But scorer and umpire gave no trouble.

John Balfour was scorer and never was a book so carefully kept. ‘Dear, dear!’ he would say when he made a mistake, and out would come his special rubber. And never was a man so elated when we were winning or so downcast when things went ill. As each batsman came in he would have a word of praise or sympathy, and all the long afternoon, except at tea-time, his pipe would be in his mouth. Then as soon as he reached home he would cover the pencil writing with his special copper-plate and off would go a report of the match to the newspaper.

John Lines was our umpire: a phlegmatic, spade-bearded man, deliberate of movement; with a vast knowledge of the rules and giving his decisions with a dignity. I consider him the fairest village umpire I have ever known, and in that respect he had indeed a thumb of gold. Most of us have been umpired out, and Breckland umpires were as partisan a collection as any in the land. I suffered much at their hands,

and one day a member of an opposing side told me the reason.

'The fact is, sir, you play strooks. Soon as onc like you start flourishin a bat, or even take his guard, the umpire know that you'll hatta come out.'

And there you have it in a nutshell. If legs were a foot from the wicket and a ball hit your pads, out you went as l.b.w. If you flicked at a ball off the wicket and missed it by a foot, there would be a chorus of, 'How's that, umpire?' from as far as deep field or long leg, and that would be the end of you.

Once when I was home on leave I happened to drop in at a pub some miles from Heathley. I ordered a pint, for I had been cycling, and the only occupant of the room had a pint with me.

'You know me, sir,' he said as he took the first pull. 'Many's the time I've seen you play for Heathley.'

'Why, yes,' I said. 'You're So-and-so, who used to umpire for So-and-so when I was a boy.'

'That's right, sir,' he said. 'Now I'm umpirin for So-and-so,' and he named a village near Norwich where they ran a cricket league. 'Get on well with them, I do. Three year runnin I've umpired them to the top o' the league.'

But of all the stories I could tell, or have heard, of umpiring, there is none that to my mind can beat this. When Lines was unable to stand umpire for us he had a substitute to hand—Jimmy Thompson, the postman who in his horse and cart did the outlying parts of the near hamlets. Jimmy may be still alive, and yet I fearlessly give his true name, for he deserves a place in Wisden.

Now it so happened that Jimmy had a letter to deliver one day near Wortley, and he knew that if he took a short cut across a heath and through a wood it would save his pony a good mile. But just as he entered the wood, the agent came galloping up on his horse and wanted to know what the devil he meant by trespassing.

Jimmy explained but the agent ordered him out of the wood and back to the road. Jimmy had a last protest. He was a servant of the Queen, so to speak, for he was wearing Her Majesty's uniform, and that gave him the right to take what short cuts seemed needful.

'Queen or no queen, out you go,' roared the agent, and

Jimmy had to back out of the wood and to the road again.

Heathley heard his story with much indignation, for that agent was an unpopular man. Then a few Saturdays later, Wortley came to Heathley and the agent was a regular member of their side. And he was a flashy bat who would flick at anything, and flick at an off ball he did, and missed it.

Up went Jimmy's hand.

'Out, sir. You're out.'

'Out?' said the astounded batsman, and looked at Pardon. But the Reverend was unaccountably gazing at the sky, so he appealed to Jimmy again.

'How can you give me out? Nobody appealed.'

'Then you weren't listenin, sir,' Jimmy told him brazenly.

The agent still stood his ground and Jimmy's patience was exhausted.

'You're out, sir,' he hollered. 'I've given ye out, and Queen or no queen, out you go!'

One other thing too was against a batsman. In those days the usual wear for cricket was a man's best clothes, with a pair of rubber-soled shoes, and only people like the Reverend wore whites. To wear whites was to put a man in the status of one who played strooks, and therefore to be outed at the first opportunity. And another tip for a present-day cricketer who plays village cricket for the first time. In these days all wear flannels—either white or grey—but never must you wear the coloured cap of a club unknown to the opposing umpire. That is the modern equivalent of being a player of strooks and will mean an inevitable end.

We had two methods of travel. Our big cart would at a pinch accommodate four with the gear, or five without it. Wake Sayer would drive the vicarage wagonette, with two on the box beside him, and the rest of the team inside with the Reverend. I liked to travel in that wagonette with its rubber-tyred wheels. And in the wagonette there would always be a council of war, and the results would be communicated to my father and the others on their arrival. That council of war would be along these lines, with the Reverend as chairman.

'I hear they've got So-and-so playing for them.'

'He won't be no trouble to us, sir. Do you put on

So-and-so to bowl on his legs. He never could do nothin with them leg balls.'

'Yes,' the Reverend might say reflectively. 'I think we can dispose of him. But what about Mr. Mortimer?'

That was Squire Mortimer of Wortley. Then there would be a laugh, and Nipper Macro's eyes would twinkle. Nipper was a character. He would pretend to take short runs, darting up the pitch, and often enough a fielder would throw in too smartly and there would be overthrows. And he would run so far up the pitch to very slow bowling that he almost hit the ball out of the bowler's hand. But his masterpiece was the annual discomfiture of Squire Mortimer. Mortimer hated slow and high-tossed bowling and Nipper would come in to the silliest of silly points and almost touching the bat. That would so exasperate the batsman that he would take a mad swipe and up would go a skier, and the hands of our field were uncommonly safe.

To get runs on the village wickets of those days was a mightily difficult business. Outfields were unmown and a six for a lost ball was a common occurrence, though the ball might be no more than fifty yards from the pitch. I think it is a not too generous estimate that any score on our wickets was worth three times as much on a really good pitch. Even the actual wickets had little rolling, and the spring preparation had to last through the year. No wonder the batsmen hopped when Lance was bowling! And almost the first piece of advice the Reverend gave me was to look out for what he called shooters, for as the pitch would have plenty of plantains, there would be at least one in every over.

I recall a match at Kilverstone, on the Park before Admiral Fisher's house. The wicket was hard and fiery and studded with plantains. I had made about ten and my eye was in. Then their fastish bowler delivered a ball and I saw it was very short, so I put my right leg across to hook it. But I didn't even move that leg. So amazing was the speed of the ball—quicker indeed than thought—that no sooner did it hit a plantain than my wicket was down. So flabbergasted was their wicket-keeper parson that he insisted on finding out just where that ball had struck and it was only a foot or two beyond half-way. I have faced Bill Hitch and Walter Brearley, but that shooter was the fastest ball off the pitch that I ever saw in a lifetime's cricket.

So with pitches and out-fields and umpires we had much to contend with, but it was unusual bowling of which the average village cricketer was afraid. 'Do he bowl breaks?' was the anxious question that would be asked concerning a bowler unknown to us. One local bowler reaped a rich and easy harvest every season with a natural off-break, for it was a ball that a village cricketer was incapable of handling: indeed, it seemed somehow to mesmerize him. Well do I remember when the famous G. B. Raikes first came as vicar to Ellingham. He could turn a ball more than a foot, and to watch a village batsman coping with such deliveries was so comical that Raikes himself could often not be able to go on for laughing. But our village batsmen would have a revenge against any ordinary bowler who fancied himself. The straighter and better the ball, the easier would the batsman's eye seem to pick it up. And their hitting to leg was miraculous in its cleanness and power. Without apparent effort the ball would be met as it rose from the pitch and the next second it would be far over the head of the square-leg umpire, and if the outfield were short, there would be another four.

Fieldsmen were placed in the standard positions and there was no nonsense like conferences between a captain and a bowler. Now and again a captain might signal a man to draw in or out, but for the rest a man knew his place and there he stayed. A long-stop was an essential, even with a wicket-keeper of the calibre of Pardon, for no man can cope with a first-class shooter. One thing of those days has long gone out of fashion. An umpire always stood with a bat in hand, and if he forgot to carry it, then he would go back shamefacedly and fetch it, for it was an unwritten law that without a bat—the mark of his office—an umpire had no authority.

Though round-arm bowling had gone and the over-arm had been legalized, under-arm bowling was still both fashionable and common, and I do not mean the bowler of slow breaks or high lobbs but a bowler of speed. If you had stood up to a bowler of my youth—again an Ellingham man—you would have known what fast bowling was, and the under-arm delivery made it most difficult to follow, and gave a ball a flat trajectory and speed off the pitch. That particular bowler was one of whom Heathley was always afraid, and no conference could find a way of attacking him. If we lost a match, it would always be against Ellingham.

They had also the most remarkable batsman in all Breckland cricket and there will be Breckland men still alive who remember him well. His name was Saunders, and I am almost sure he was a blacksmith. But he was everywhere known as the Ellingham Stonewaller.

He was an immensely powerful man, but he would make his block exactly three inches from the stumps, and he was never known to be out by hitting his wicket. When he had taken middle, he would hold his bat dead upright so that it covered the stumps. His immense hands also concealed the bails. As for his stance, his right toe would be down wicket and placed about three inches from his bat so that no ball could get through the space. Then he would stand rigid and immobile, letting every straight or near-straight ball hit pads or bat. The Rock of Gibraltar was nothing to him. No umpire had the nerve to cheat him out, for if the ball hit his pad, then that pad had never been moved. And he never nibbled at a tempting ball. If he did get out—and often he went through a season with his wicket intact—it would be through some lucky snick off the edge of his bat. And meanwhile the man at the other end would be making the runs, and so virtually Ellingham had a double team. But he did score occasionally. If there was a rank bad ball well on the leg, round would swish his bat and that ball would be a certain four or even six. But he was rarely run out, for he was remarkably spry between the wickets, and a canny man about short runs. If a fellow batsman did run him out, then the look on his face was that of Satan leaving the celestial realms. A good man had gone, and he was well aware of it.

Heathley had its own under-arm bowler, and he was that Obadiah Church to whose heirs and assigns I owe the sum of twopence for purloined chocolate. He was responsible for a catchword—uttered *sotto voce*—that greeted the arrival of every vicar or rector who came in to bat. A certain parson—and this was before my time and when Oby, as he was called, was living in Heathley—had been far too long at the wicket and Oby was put on with his under-arms. Oby was very much of a wag, and to the parson he remarked, ‘Now, sir, down come your pulpit!’ And the remark would never have become a catchword if the unexpected hadn’t happened, for at Oby’s first ball, down went the stumps.

Parsons were the mainstay of Breckland cricket and for

that at least should be honoured. One of them was responsible for another catchword which I could never understand till told the story, for I never played against him, and though I knew him well by sight, he had retired from the game before my return to the village. He was a very big man and with so Falstaffian a belly that stooping was impossible. His position in the field was therefore at point and he would make it a fairly forward one. When he took up his position it was as if he anchored himself, and he was a veritable mountain of a man. But at cover-point he would always have Green, his coachman, and it was he who had therefore to fag for his master. The parson's only contribution would be to pivot somehow and call after the perspiring fieldsman, "Throw the ball in, Green!" And many a hundred times have I heard it called to a fielder in the deep who chased a fast-moving ball.

I say it with humility rather than ostentation, since no credit is due to me, but I have lived through the great and indeed the Golden Age of English cricket. Those few giants that preceded me were well known by sight, for my nose would be pressed against the window of William Cash's shop if the papers had pictures of cricket or cricketers. But I have seen most of those giants, from Shrewsbury to Ranji, Grace to Jessop and Tom Richardson to Noble. I have seen many Tests, if only in England, and, what was almost as good, Yorkshire in the days of Hirst at his best. But of all the matches I have seen or in which I have taken a small part, there is none that can bear comparison with a match that was played by Heathley. I have elsewhere given a description of it but that was what might be called a novelist's description with too dexterous an eye on the reader, and a plot. This is a simple record, and I have only to close my eyes and I am back on Wortley Park.

Heathley was playing Wortley away, and Wortley had a good side. Thanks to the interest of Squire Mortimer, the outfield was well mown and the pitch was in fine park-land that sloped away and away towards the village church. The wicket too was always better than most, so was their tea, and it's a poor cock that can't crow on its own dung-hill.

But the month was July. It was true that Lance was at home, but at least four of our best men were in camp with the Volunteers. What was worse was that others were

needed for an urgent job of thistle-spudding. On the Thursday my father had a gloomy face and announced that he'd put my name on the List. On the Saturday morning only five names were down. Nipper hoped to play but couldn't be sure, for he was working at Cranberry and mightn't get home in time. My father went to see the Reverend.

'Play? Of course we'll play,' the Reverend said.

'With only five men, sir?'

'Someone will turn up,' the Reverend assured him, and so the match was on. But that day there was no need to take our big cart for there was room for all of us—scorer and umpire included—in the wagonette. Then as we came to the fork to Cranberry, there was Nipper waiting, and we felt like cheering.

We got to Wortley Park and in due course the Reverend tossed up, and as he won he decided to bat, for a man or so might turn up.

'You've got to make one, Sayer,' he said to his coachman.

'Me, sir?' said Wake. 'Whuh, I never played in my life!'

'All the more reason why you should start,' the Reverend told him calmly, and so John Balfour had seven names to write on the batting list. The Reverend usually went in first but that day he kept himself in reserve. In went my father and Lance. Lance was hit-or-miss and my father what he called a nudger. Once he had been a hitter but now he was a careful turner aside of fast bowling, though he could hit when he had a mind.

Well, we got ten runs or so and then came a ball that was historic. It was very fast indeed, waist high and on the leg. My father did not actually hit it. His bat caught it with some perfection of timing and urged it still faster on its way, and while we yelled encouragement, the batsmen ran. On that smooth, dry turf that ball seemed to go on for ever, and downhill towards the church. It took three relays to throw it in, and the batsmen ran seven, and but for the fact that both were winded, it might well have been ten.

Meanwhile old Postman Daw came up in his pony-cart.

'Come on, Daw,' the Reverend called. 'You've got to play for us.'

'I'm too old for them kind of capers, sir,' said Daw, but somehow or other the Reverend roped him in and told John Balfour to put down his name. Then he sent out Nipper to

relieve Lines as umpire, and Lines made another batsman, though it was twenty years since he had touched a bat.

Meanwhile that seven all-run had demoralized the Wortley side and runs began to come anyhow. Then my father was l.b.w., though maintaining on his return that his pad had been a foot from the wicket. In went Lines with orders to block, and he and Lance put on a few more. When Lance was bowled the score stood at over a hundred, and his contribution was over forty. In went the Reverend, and was out again almost at once, and on his face was a look of tragedy as he came back with a swing of his bat. Then Lines resumed umpiring and Nipper went in.

But it was as well that the Reverend was out, for who should appear to watch the match but William Cash.

'Ah, Cash,' said the Reverend. 'The very man we've been waiting for. You'll practically complete the side.'

On Cash's face was that dry ironic smile, but no shake of his head. The old cricketer in him was too strong, and John Balfour put down his name. And in the same moment who should appear but Field. He had walked in across the heaths, and his black retriever was at his heels.

'Well, that completes the side,' the Reverend said. 'John, put Mr. Field's name down.'

Field protested that he hadn't played since his boyhood, and then hadn't been anything of a hand, but he got much the same answer that had been given to Wake Sayer. Meanwhile another man was out but Nipper was still in, and runs were still coming. I went in, and Tom Lake, and a few more were scraped. When the turn of the veterans came, Wake didn't know how to put on the pads, but he went in with sleeves rolled up, and though he was bowled for a duck, he was there while Nipper made a few more. And finally when the last man was out, the score was a hundred and fifty-three, and I know that because I have a copy of the match which John Balfour sent to the newspaper.

It was a record Heathley score and yet at tea we could not feel too elated. Nor did the Wortley team seem downhearted. They had at least three players who played strooks and some other useful men, and what we had done, they might do too. And there was the problem of our field and where to put the stiff and old. But William Cash went to his old position of long-stop, though I forget if he stuffed his socks with grass.

And by sandwiching the spry with the decrepit, the Reverend had a field of sorts.

Lance opened the bowling with his expresses, his long legs striding and his arms like the sails of a windmill. At the other end was Nipper with his artful slows. The score shows that wickets fell regularly, and I remember that Nipper was taken off when Mortimer came in, and Mortimer was duly worried out. When the Wortley innings ended, the score was fifty-four, and Lance had taken six for twelve, though even Cash had not been able to manage some that had gone for byes.

That was the match, and the greatest day in the long cricket history of Heathley. Every man and boy who had played in it had a something thereafter that no other Heathley cricketer ever had, and when on a home match we would come on the ground, and Field or Cash or Daw would be standing there to watch the game, Nipper would call with his grin, 'What's the matter with you, together? How is't you ain't a-playin to-day?' Old Daw would give the answer.

'Thowt we'd take a rest and give some o' you young'uns a chance.'

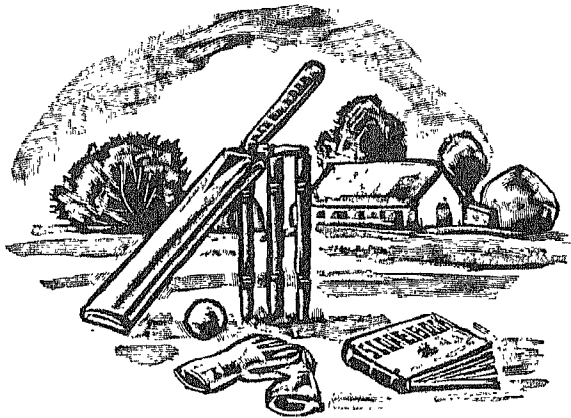
Many years later—in the Spring of 1916—I was a Divisional Bombing Officer, and one day I was inspecting certain units, among them a battalion of my own regiment. The young officer who received me said he had his men ready if I would like to see them in action, and that was just the sort of inspection I liked.

They were throwing small sandbags of the weight of a Mills bomb and this was followed by live stuff. One man stood out. He had the action of a natural bowler, body and arms moving rhythmically, and almost without effort he could lob a bomb within a yard circle and up to forty yards. He was beautiful to watch and I asked if I might have a word with him. The subaltern called him up, and he saluted smartly. Then his eyes opened and he was faintly grinning. It was Nipper.

Out went my hand and that subaltern must have thought me a queer disciplinarian, for Nipper and I were talking of home, and most of our talk was a replay of that great match with Wortley. Then we shook hands again and that was the last time we met. Three months later he was killed in France.

I, who as a boy could not understand the tears that came

to John Balfour's eyes, will think sometimes of that day at Wortley, and of Nipper Macro. I see his grin and his twinkling eyes. I see him on that bombing ground, and then I begin to prowling about the room or go elsewhere to find a something to occupy my thoughts and hands. But perhaps there are still Elysian fields, and Nipper and I may talk again, and with even less restraint. *Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit.*





Chapter XV

THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE: SPRING AND WINTER

THE first sign of Spring was the appearance of snowdrops in one of the Park woods that abutted on Lammass Meadows. Our woods had little or no undergrowth except hazel, and as a keeper therefore had excellent visibility, that snowdrop gathering was a mighty risky business. Finch also would pass that wood on his walks through the village, but we were less afraid of him than of his daughter who would descend from her pony-trap, scold us, and then order us back to the road. It was the same with violets when they came at the end of March or early April. My recollections are that they accommodated themselves in some mysterious way to the seasons, for we could always rely on finding them on a Good Friday. In the hedges one could always find white violets, but the Homes somehow despised those albino growths. What we liked were the true violets that grew in the wood by the Fish Pond or in Church Plantation.

The last of the gatherable flowers to appear were the primroses of early April and among our yellows were many sports of pink and pale orange, and these grew in one place only—on the banks of one of Kerridge's meadows. Again by ill luck that meadow was near a breeding-ground for pheasants and Eagle would chase us away.

I have said that St. Valentine's Day marked a change of hours for the labourers. But it was also a much anticipated species of festival. The custom of sending valentines by post

had long died out though in one of our shops there would be displayed those lurid caricatures which could be sent anonymously for the annoyance of some enemy. But the principal custom was the interchange of presents and on St. Valentine's Night every respectable citizen would remain indoors, except those who would be the bearers of parcels, and the reasons for all this will be later apparent. I think in some ways that that giving of presents was as lovely a custom as I have ever known, for though one might guess from whom a present came the gifts were always anonymous. The method was this and we will suppose it is the Home house on St. Valentine's Night.

My mother has bought presents for us but of that we are utterly unaware and it will be my father who will deliver them. She also has presents for friends. These may be knick-knacks or, if for the old or needy like Granny Francis, a tin of biscuits or a half-pound of tea. But it is the parcels themselves that cause the excitement, both of sending and giving, for even the tiniest article is wrapped and wrapped with paper after paper and tied and tied again with string so that its opening will make at least ten minutes of excitement, and as I have said, there will be no clue to the sender. All that will be written on the very outside will be the name of the recipient.

It is comfortably dark and my mother draws me aside and hands me a parcel.

'Now, dear, this is for Mrs. Francis, and be sure you don't let anyone see you. And mind you hurry straight back.'

Off I go with the parcel, passing on my way others abroad on the same errand. Very quietly I approach Mrs. Francis's back door, lay the parcel on the doorstep and give a thunderous knock. A voice inside says, 'Whuh, who can that be?' And that is the signal to nip behind the water-tub by the shed eaves. The door is opened and young Tom retrieves the parcel. I creep out to a door or a window and listen and then at last run home again.

'Mother, I delivered it all right, and you wouldn't believe how they were surprised!'

There are other parcels for me to deliver or perhaps there comes a thunderous knock at one of our doors and I rush to open it. But wariness is needed as you will later see, and if the parcel is a genuine one, the first excitement is to read the name.

'It's for you, mother!' or, more exciting still, 'Mother, it's for me!' And that last would be one of my mother's own gifts perhaps and deposited on the door-step by my father. And so it would go on till it was long past our time for bed.

But St. Valentine's Night was one of the two notable nights for 'them chaps', for it gave incredible opportunities for horseplay and devilry, and it was one of the few nights that old Potter, our policeman, dreaded. He was a heavy, lumbering man with a huge pink face and among those much given to perspiration. Like George Spline he would announce his approaches only too audibly and compared with the spryness, ingenuity, and ability of 'them chaps' he was a Spanish Galleon beset by the waspish craft of Devon.

The headquarters of 'them chaps' on Valentine's Night would be the Reading Room and there they would prepare their parcels. These were of two kinds. One would be a dummy parcel to which was attached a string and several of these would be in use at the same time. Such a parcel would be put on a doorstep and when the householder stooped to pick it up it would be whisked away, and you would hear, 'You let me catch you, together! I know who y'are.'

The second kind of parcel would be made up to look absolutely genuine but would contain such unsavoury gifts as a lump of horse dung or a dead rat. But the height of devilry and ingenuity was to combine the first kind of parcel with something quite new, and this would be the province of the bigger lads and young men. One of their number would be armed with a tremendously long willow rod which he would hold poised above the door. A second one would lay the parcel on a doorstep where the one who retrieved it was almost certain to be a man, and a third would be holding the string. When all was ready there would be a knock at the door. When the householder stooped for the parcel it would be whisked out of his very hand and down would come the willow pole on his skull, and before he could recover himself the night would be still again except for a faint scampering of distant feet.

It was that cracking of skulls and the assault upon the person of a parishioner that would bring Potter in pursuit, but his main difficulty was that in the pitch dark he could never tell 'them chaps' from those who were about their lawful occasions. So all his night would be spent in running, hollering, perspiring, and wheezing and there is no wonder

that at the very end of his days he lost his wits altogether. He still lived on in the village with a relative to look after him and his was only a kind of second childhood, girt about with strange wonderings and bewilderments. He would walk a few yards and then halt. 'No, no, no, no, no,' he would say, or 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,' and then slowly resume his walk.

One sign that summer was at hand would be the appearance of German Bands, and strange though it might seem that they should visit villages so remote, such villages were highly profitable, for it was the unsophisticated like ourselves who found their artless music entertaining, and there would be few who did not give at least a copper. They would usually be about four in number and rarely as many as six. We children loved them because of the quaint English and their pleasing and ingratiating smiles; but it was my father who was always the most excited. Under our front windows there would always be the same ritual.

'Not a penny do you get from me,' my father would say, 'unless you play me *Vital Spark*.'

We children knew well enough the words of Pope's translation for it was in our Book of Anthems and we would also sing the very tune which the Band would play. But why a German Band should invariably be in possession of the necessary parts for such a playing I cannot imagine, unless it were that the tune was for some reason famous throughout Breckland. But I must admit that when such a Band rendered it, it had harmonies and sonorities that stirred one strangely, and my father would sit silent and rapt. Maybe both words and music would bring to his mind the sombre grandeur of man's reunion with his Maker, and at the end he would always let out a deep breath. And then the leader of the Band would be given a sixpence and with many bows and smiles the small company would go on its way.

But the real opening of the Heathley year was Whit Sunday, and indeed that day and Flower Show Day were the two most notable of all the Heathley year. On Whit Sunday the Friendly Societies would parade and have their ceremonial march to the church. For me the excitement and anticipation would begin much earlier, for I would have to be measured in Robert Addis's shop for my annual new suit and this would be first worn on that Whit Sunday.

The headquarters of the Foresters was the *Lion* and since those were the days of continuous hours, members would begin to arrive well before ten o'clock. As their procession would move off at about a quarter to eleven, Chapel Sunday School would accommodate its time so that we could go to the Mound and watch it. It would be a brave and colourful sight, for the trappings of the Foresters were far more gaudy and ornate than ours. Jakey Woods and Bandy Mason were among those who would always wear the full regalia of feathered headdress, sash, baldric and horn, and I always had a sneaking wish that I could be a Forester instead of an Oddfellow and don such romantic adornments. Then up would drive a wagonette and in it would be the Hareborough Town Band with as many as eight performers, and of particular interest was the big drum. Their uniforms would be resplendent with scarlet and gold and, whatever their music, it would be the whirl of the drum-sticks that would always catch the eye.

Just before the moment of moving off William Cash would appear and he would take his stance at a point which the procession would pass and make a note of their numbers for comparison with the Oddfellows. Then at last the procession would begin forming up. In front would be the juveniles and behind them the Band, the officials of the local branch and then the main body. The Bandmaster would give a signal and off the procession would move, and to the stirring strains of a march. And it would be that march which the village boys would whistle for months to come. Past the school, through the meadow gate and the Home woods that procession would go, and then break pairs as they entered the church door. When the service began the Reverend would use his annual formula.

'On this Whit Sunday morning I am glad to welcome my brother Foresters to God's House,' and thereupon Mattins would go their normal way. Then there would be the procession home again and the Mound would be completely circled twice. After that the Band would play selections till it was time for dinner, and all the Mound purlieus would be packed with spectators.

The afternoon would bring the turn of the Oddfellows and I would be too excited to enjoy my dinner. From a bedroom drawer would be taken the blue sash with its magnificent

star and gold fringe which my father wore as a high badge of office. Our headquarters was the school as befitted the much more sober body which we considered ourselves, and there we would assemble. Men would be wearing their sashes, William Cash with a purple sash that stood up well against the black of his cutaway coat. On the lapels of us juveniles would be pinned silver stars and there would be much preening and puffing out of chests. Then at last we would line up and to the music of the same Band we would move off and to the very same march. John Pardon would greet us in the Church.

'On this Whit Sunday afternoon I am glad to welcome my Brother Oddfellows to God's House,' and then Evensong would pursue its normal way. But on the return journey William Cash would always move ahead and count us as we emerged from the main road, and the excitement would be to know if we had mustered a bigger company than the Foresters of the morning. His face would give the answer and in my time we always beat them, but only just. As far as I remember the figures there would be just under one hundred and fifty of them and just over of us. But what stirring sense of communal life! What meetings of old friends! What outskirts of hamlets and lonely farms were emptied of their folk those pious morns to assemble on one day of the year and to march with their fellows or watch the moving scene! Ichabods are easy to utter but there, in my judgment, is an apt occasion.

Along the buildings of the *Lion* and far down the adjacent roads would be the traps and sulkies of those who had driven in to attend those parades or watch. On the Mound the Band would once more play selections till it was five o'clock and time for tea and then the crowds would reluctantly disperse. Chapel Service that night would seem a dull affair and a kind of passing knell. Off would come the silver star and my father's sash would be placed between layers of tissue paper and stowed in its drawer again. That night too Jakey Woods would be drunk, and Bandy Mason and many another, and when the news of that was related on the following morning it would be, as it were, the last scant reverberation of a day that could come no more till a following year.

Some years before this present war I attended the Flower

Show of a certain village of some eight hundred souls. It was described to me as being both well-managed and prosperous. That last word should have given cause for alarm but I was far too eager to go in quest of my youth, for it was many years since I had attended a village Flower Show.

There was a fairly large marquee in front of which sat a Band which played selections. The exhibits seemed to me very few though the vegetables were the finest I had seen in my life. But the flowers were of the poorest quality and there was no home-made bread, or specimens of handicraft.

In under half an hour I had made my tour of that marquee and then I asked a man at what time the sports would begin. He looked amazed, and then we had some talk. Sports were impossible, he said, and whatever the prizes, for the young men would never waste their time to train for them, and even a pound would seem none too attractive for a first prize. All that the visitors were given to pass their afternoon and evening, was a series of somewhat tawdry and catch-penny side-shows, the profits from which went to swell the already distended credit balance of the Horticultural Committee.

Our Flower Show was held in that breathing-space between haysel and harvest and usually towards the end of July. It was open to certain neighbouring hamlets and all others were rigidly excluded. But Flower Show would begin long before July for on the meadows you would see 'them chaps' in training. That was one thing they took seriously and not wholly, I believe, because a prize of even five shillings was a desirable sum, and so their training was arduous and drastic. The Park too would be alive for a week beforehand for there would be the courses to mark and the great ring to be roped and, the day beforehand, the erection of a monster marquee. John Balfour would also arrange with some celebrated proprietor of swings and roundabouts to assemble his show on the morning of the actual day, though it was never allowed to do business till the sports and the prize-giving were over.

With us there was no jiggery-pokery about exhibits, not that such was suspected, for a man had no means of obtaining flowers and vegetables from the towns and each man knew what was grown in another's garden. For the best garden or allotment there was always a prize of a pound, and on the day before the Show the Reverend, as Chairman of the Committee,

would accompany the judges in their tour of the village in the vicarage wagonette, and until that tour was completed no man was allowed to pull a bean or cut a cabbage.

On the morning of Flower Show Day every road and lane that led to the Park would be alive with carts, barrows, and perambulators loaded with exhibits. By noon the judging would be finally set out. Seats would be placed in a special enclosure for the gentry of Hall, Little Heathley, and neighbouring hamlets, and there would be another enclosure for those who ranked immediately below.

Two o'clock was opening time, the charge for admission being sixpence for adults, twopence for children, and babies-in-arms were admitted free. People would tramp in from miles, but all those collected monies would be expended on prizes and the Committee would consider itself lucky if when the accounts came to be settled it had a balance in hand of five pounds. Sometimes the prizes would be in kind. The smallest first prize would be five shillings and for longer races as much as ten, while for those open to the whole of Breckland—and men would come in from Hareborough and Ouseland—the first prize might be the incredible one of a pound. Then there would be the innumerable prizes for the marquee exhibits and altogether the Committee would have to handle and manipulate considerable sums.

On that day all Heathley would be utterly deserted for every man, woman, and child would be on the Park. A burglar could have reaped a magnificent harvest; not that we were ever troubled by burglaries, and at nights our doors would be left unbolted and even open. Even my mother, shy as she was of public appearances, would attend a Flower Show, and after she had looked through the marquee she would take her seat in the second enclosure with the younger children and that would be her headquarters for the rest of the day, and I or my father would fetch them tea from the refreshment tent.

That great marquee was a magnificent sight and it was filled with every kind of scent and homely smell. Squire Mortimer was a noted raiser of carnations and on a huge table would be placed his display, hundreds and hundreds of blooms and labelled, 'Not for Competition'. There would be the Vicarage and Hall roses similarly labelled and table after table of homely flowers and pot plants. There would be the vegetables

and scores of home-made loaves cut to reveal their texture, and eggs and butter and jars of jam and honey, and even handiwork of macramé and crochet and lace.

At three o'clock the sports would begin, and with the children's races, and the Reverend would always be head judge. One of my sisters could run like a stag and whatever her class and age she invariably won first prize. My father too—and from him we all inherited our speed—would generally win the race for the married men for which the first prize was a leg of mutton. There were no special costumes for that race, for a man would take off his coat and boots and roll up his sleeves. That running in stockinged feet was a false move for the turf would be hard and slippery and often abounding in thistles, and my father had his own special pair of spiked shoes. There would be touches of humour, too, with a greasy pole and a greasy pig, and tilting at a bucket and sack and obstacle races. The climax would be those races open to all Breckland and there would be tremendous cheering if a Heathley man beat some noted runner from Hareborough or Ouseland.

During the afternoon there would be intervals for the obtaining of teas. In one such interval there would often be a Punch and Judy Show for the youngest children and a Concert or Minstrel Party for the elders. My father would always be mightily superior about that Hareborough Concert Party, for to him its members were men whom he knew, and in his young days in London he had frequented both the Moore and Burgess and the Christy Minstrels. But most of us had no such superiorities, and I would always wriggle my way to the very front of the standing crowd. I repeat none of their jokes for you can hear them to-day from the self-styled comedians of the B.B.C., and I remember only one of their songs. Its title and refrain was *They Never Trouble Me*, and I still remember a fragment of one chorus—

They never trouble me,
They never trouble me,
My skin's as tough as oakum,
One bite of it will choke 'em.

with the reference apparently either to fleas or to mosquitoes, though which I forget.

Before the Prize Giving my mother would make her way home with the girls but I would be allowed to stay on till

dusk with my father. He and the Committee would be busy already at lowering tents and clearing the ground and I would manage to sidle away to the swings and roundabouts and stalls, now thronged with people, and all the air hideous with the blaring of the steam organ. If I had been given a shilling to spend—and that would have been taken from my money-box—there might be sixpence left after I had paid for my tea, and of that at least threepence would be expended on a present for my mother. On one occasion I expended the whole sixpence for there was a bargain too good to be missed—a large cut-glass bottle filled with yellow scent. When I brought that home in triumph my mother was much touched by my generosity and thoughtfulness. Only years afterwards did she tell me—and she still has the cut-glass bottle and stopper—that the scent had been poured down the sink, for when she applied it to a handkerchief it produced a series of vivid yellow stains.

At dusk then I would go back to my father and he and I would walk home together, and he would be telling me who had won this and that and, best of all, he would be carrying that leg of mutton. The girls would be in bed and soon I would be there too. But not to sleep, for across the meadows would be coming the faint noise of dancers and merry-makers, and above it all would be the monstrous blaring of that huge steam organ.





Chapter XVI

THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE: AUTUMN AND WINTER

IMMEDIATELY after harvest a caravan and trailer would draw up on the Mound, and it would be that of a Cheap Jack. Hard on his heels would come William Cash, as representative of the Parish Council, and to give the reminder that the charge was fourpence per wheel per night. Often there would be heated arguments, with the Cheap Jack pleading that he was a poor man with a family, or asking what usurious custom it was that demanded payment in advance. But whatever his speciousness and volubility, Cash would say little, and on his face would be that dour and cynical smile. There he stayed until he got the money—and he was always paid.

That night, to the light of naphtha flares, the village would assemble round the Cheap Jack's stall. The methods of a Dutch auction were the vogue, and everyone would wait until the offer reached not only its ultimate lowest, but with something else thrown in. The patter was the best part of the proceedings, and the jokes would bring blushes to the women's faces and there would be much giggling and nudging of ribs. But small as the prices were, the goods must have had a quality or the same man could never have appeared each year, and I remember how my father would swear that a certain saw which he bought on the Mound was twice as good as one he bought in Norwich for twice the price.

The autumn too was the great time for the killing of pigs. There would always be a crowd of boys, and there were

standard tricks to play on newcomers. A man would remark that a gut had a queer smell, for instance, and then hold it to the nose of some young innocent, and then as he was sniffing, the gut would be rubbed on his face. When some boy was given the bladder it would be at once inflated for a game of football. But I was never really hardened to pig-killing and I would shut my eyes at that ghastly thrust and twist of the knife, and the gush of blood.

For the evenings there would be a Magic Lantern Lecture at the chapel schoolroom and that would be always crowded, even if the lecture had a religious and missionary flavour. In the chapel too would be what was known as a Service of Song. That would be a reading from a special book and consisted of a story of some two hours' length. The reading would be done by some special preacher, and printed in the same book would be the words and music of hymns suited to the text, and these the choir would have prepared. Whatever the night, a Service of Song would mean a full chapel, and 'them chaps' would crowd in at the back. The stories would be homely and with a strong religious bias, but they often ended with wedding bells or a happy entry through the Pearly Gates.

Late autumn and winter were the seasons for the two Club dinners, and these would be held in the school, and at seven o'clock. The great thing about them was that the cold meats were butchers' meats, including the luxury of boiled salt beef. There would be a high table, with the Reverend in the centre, and when he tapped the table for grace, he would address us as Brother Foresters or Brother Oddfellows. Sam Smith would usually contrive to attend both dinners, a custom which was never frowned on, and Sam would get more than his money's worth. On one celebrated occasion he was unable to rise when the signal was given for God Save The Queen, and Sam had to sing sitting. On another occasion Sam was eating at so furious a rate that the Reverend felt compelled to say, 'Steady, Smith; steady!'

During their dinners the Oddfellows would be regaled with the music of harp and flute, played by a brother and sister from Hareborough, and after both dinners the room would be cleared for dancing, the music invariably that of an accordion or concertina. Before the dancing began I had to come home, and the Reverend would always leave too:

not that there was rowdyism, though across the road were two pubs, and dancing was thirsty work.

For 'them chaps' Guy Fawkes Night was the other great night of the Heathley year, but for Potter it was a nightmare. My father would sometimes be away from the village for a night or two, on business for the local branch of the Odd-fellows or in London where he would go to buy horses, and one such absence happened to coincide with Guy Fawkes Night. I would be about ten years old, for my mother must have been under the impression that I was at John Balfour's house for private coaching, but at any rate I managed to make my way down the village and attached myself to 'them chaps'. What happened was for me both exciting and terrifying and I came home long before the horseplay had reached a climax.

For Guy Fawkes Night 'them chaps' would make great preparations, and the routine was hallowed by unholy tradition. They had, for instance, an extremely light but tall ladder, and during the year this was concealed in a wood, as was the celebrated cannon, and Potter never discovered the whereabouts of either. On that night parishioners would almost barricade themselves in their houses, but even that brought no immunity. The ladder would be quietly placed along the thatch or tiles of some cottage the owner of which was thought a desirable object of baiting, and then a lad would climb it and drop down a smoking chimney a good handful of crackers. When those fell on the fire with explosions and splutterings, it must have been as if the devil himself were in the flames and cinders. Then there was a trick with a button attached to a window and manipulated so that it kept up an irritating whirr, and when the good man of the house came out to investigate, lighted fireworks would be thrown through the open door.

But it was the cannon that was both electrifying and dangerous. I never saw it closely or by daylight, for it would be spirited away before morning, but I know it was mounted on an immensely stout piece of old oak and two of the strongest of 'them chaps' could only just stagger with it. The cannon itself was the barrel of some old and mighty gun and had a touch-hole, and the whole was fastened to the oak mounting with innumerable staples and wrought-iron nails.

The method of firing was to fill the barrel with any kind

of wadding in front of the gunpowder charge, and then to lay a slow train to the touch-hole. All except the firer would get well under cover and when he had lighted the train he too would bolt for a tree. When that cannon went off the windows would rattle and silence would be shattered by the devastating roar. Into the air the cannon would be hurled, and as much as twenty yards away. In a flash it would be retrieved and 'them chaps' would be through a gate and behind a hedge.

For Potter would be coming. In the distance would be heard, 'I know ye, together! I know ye; all on ye!'

Then he would come lumbering to the scene and the stench of gunpowder would betray the spot. But already 'them chaps' would be withdrawing along the hedge, only to reappear at the other end of the village where the cannon would be fired off again. Again Potter would come, and so it would continue till late into the night. Why that barrel never burst I do not know, but burst it never did, and as late as twenty years ago I was assured that it was still in existence, though with none to fire it.

Winter was the time for tinnings, for that homely commination was still strong throughout Breckland. But if one of 'them chaps' got married, then the tinning would last no more than half an hour maybe, and would be a kind of serenade or valediction.

But if it were a marriage of which the village disapproved, as when a widow or widower married when the departed had scarcely been interred, or when the ages of the parties were ludicrously dissimilar, then, though the disapproval might not be audibly expressed, 'them chaps' would somehow know that a tinning would be considered in order, and that even Potter would be conveniently absent or deaf.

So when the couple had just retired, and that might be at about nine o'clock, 'them chaps' would make a stealthy and silent approach to the cottage. Each would have a tin can or pail or bath, and an iron rod or broom-handle for drum-stick. Then at a given signal the infernal din would begin. Not only was there the beating of the tins but there would be cat-calls and innuendos and snatches of ribald songs. Often 'them chaps' would arrange relays, so that while half rested in the Reading Room, the rest would keep up the din, and so it

would go on till well after midnight. As for the badgered bridegroom, he would know better than to open his door and protest, for when a man so ventured he would be drenched with buckets of water.

So strong and even damnatory was that public disapproval that a couple would find it hard to live down. More than one couple could not even face the village, and left to live in another. But if 'them chaps' tried a tinning that had no public backing, then the men would speedily aid Potter in putting an end to it, for no one in those days would have his rest disturbed without good cause.

When there were frosts we would slide and skate on the Plains or one of the many pits on the village Common, and though the swamps of the Plains were larger and more shallow, it was the Common we preferred and because of its furze. In the year of the great frost, and that would be when I was ten years old, there was skating for weeks on end and great fires of furze would be lighted round which the spectators could stand. In that winter, too, the horses could not force a way through with the snow-plough and the men of the village had to clear roads and lanes with shovels. Stile Meadow was impassable and a bullock shed of ours was so buried that a tunnel had to be cut and the cattle driven out. It was that celebrated winter when Sam Smith also coined a new village word, which remained as his nickname from then on, in addition to being commonly taken into use in the sense for which Sam intended it.

A dog and its kennel had been completely buried and Sam was called in by a neighbour to dig it out. The dog was still hale and hearty; at any rate no sooner did Sam uncover it than it bit him in the leg.

'What did you do to't, Sam?' somebody asked.

'I swashed on to't,' said Sam, and from then on Swash was his nickname. As for the meaning of *swash*, I can only guess it to be a mixture of swish, slash, and smash. But a word like that is best explained by a wholly new story.

When I was a boy I went one afternoon to the cricket ground and an old man was getting the pitch in order. To flatten it he had a tool which I erroneously thought was of his own invention and so efficient was it that I have since made many a one for flattening my lawns. It consisted of a flat and heavy piece of oak or elm, smooth below and about two

foot by eighteen inches. Into the top was fixed a long and stout handle at an angle of thirty degrees to the ground. The flattener took a deal of lifting and when the man let it fall it was a flattener indeed. I asked him what its name was and he said it was a *wask*, pronounced, by the way, to rhyme with *task*. I said that was a funny name whereupon he asked what else you could call a *wask* but a *wask*? And he was quite right.

Christmas would draw inevitably nearer, and in our house would be done all those things which you remember from your own childhood. Mother would be stoning raisins and cutting candied peel into the thinnest of slices, and we with our eyes on her to see who would be given the hard core of sugar. The time would come to help stir the puddings, and when the last available portion had been removed we would be allowed to scrape the great mixing-pan for ourselves and lick the wooden spoon. Mincemeat would be made, and ginger wine. I wish I had time to write to my mother for that recipe, for though it was non-alcoholic, it was hot, sweet, and delectable to the taste, and all I remember is that citric and tartaric acids, ginger, and loaf sugar—lump as we called it—were the main constituents. One night old Jimmy Downs called to see my father and my mother gave him a glass of that ginger wine, Jimmy, more at home with a beer mug, first sipped and then drank.

'What do you think of it, Mr. Downs?' asked my mother anxiously.

'Only one thing wrong with it, ma'am,' said Jimmy.

'And what's that?' asked my mother rather sharply.

'It's too more-ish,' said Jimmy and was straightway given another glass.

In the week before Christmas there would be a special shooting party at the Hall, and for that week the Home woods were specially reserved. If you have not realized how swarming our village and our corn would be with pheasants, I can tell you that in that week's three days of shooting about two thousand pheasants would be shot. And after the shoot the keepers would make the tour of the village with Green's Christmas boxes—a brace of pheasants for a farmer and of rabbits for a cottager. When our pheasants arrived my father would regard them with very much of a grimness, and it was

not hard to guess what he was thinking. But the matter of those pheasants had been settled long ago. He would never have eaten them and they were too valuable to give away. So the compromise was that they were sold, but in this case the money was never my mother's perquisite.

The great event of Christmas Eve was carol singing, and there we take leave of 'them chaps', and in a decorous mood, for John Balfour would be in charge. And if you feel you would like to say farewell to Heathley and take a last look at it in the process, turn to that map of the village and follow the carol singers' route.

At about ten o'clock the singers would assemble outside the Reading Room and to 'them chaps' would be added the best male singers of Church and Chapel. The repertoire was strictly limited to five pieces: *While Shepherds Watched*, *Christians Awaken*, *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*, *O Come All Ye Faithful*, and finally *The First Noel*. But as we knew only one verse of that it would have to be repeated. At each stop, two carols would be given from that repertoire.

If it was a dark night lanterns would be carried. The first carols would be sung in front of Robert Addis's shop and then the procession would move down Harford Road to as far as Moat Farm. If the weather were exceptionally good it would go on to Hill Farm, and so by the track at the Devil's Pit Hole to Little Heathley, and from there back by a path which led across the Park to the Hall. Then it would go down the private road to Field's cottage, and across Stile Meadow to Josh Till's and the cottages nearby. Next came West Farm and then a return to the vicarage, and by then it would be midnight. Next would come Vicarage Road and William Cash, and then a left turn along the Hareborough Road to John Balfour's. Next across the path to Parliament and into the Shopleigh Road, and so by Kerridge's Farm to the Mound, where a final performance would be given in front of the *Lion*. In the Reading Room there would be a roaring fire to welcome back the party, but all along that route—not only at the Hall but at each farmhouse—would be beer and hot cocoa, mince-pies and sausage rolls, but as the night would usually be bitter it was the cocoa that would be most in demand.

Years later, when I was at home, I would lie awake in my bed to hear the carol singers. Each individual halt could be

judged for the sound of the singing would come clear across the fields and through the frosty night. Then at long last it would slowly near, and then it would be beneath our own windows. Then it would move on, and it was when the sound came from the near distance and then slowly receded that it would make a kind of lullaby and at once I would be asleep. By then it would be Christmas Day, and it was on a Christmas Day that I was born.

But thereby hangs a tale, and I am sure I shall be pardoned if I end this book as I began it—with myself.

A few years ago I was introduced to a charming man—well known already to many of my friends—who had been described to me as the greatest living amateur caster of horoscopes. He was a man of outstanding charm, a brilliant linguist, and the last person in the world to be suspected of trickery, and it was plain that his reputation was a genuine one. I told him that I too was interested in astrology and in a few moments he was asking permission to cast my horoscope. He said it might reveal something of the past and of the future and it would explain my mental make-up, and that last seemed particularly interesting. But everything would depend upon his being given exact data: precise place of birth, the exact date, and the very hour. I told him I was in the happy position of being able to supply everything. I was born at Heathley on the 25th December in such and such a year and at two o'clock in the morning. He was very insistent on that exact time and said that the difference of even an hour would alter the whole complexion of the horoscope.

In due course the horoscope arrived. About the past he was all at sea, for what was written were the things that I ought obviously to have been. As for the future, there could be no testing of that. But the revelations about my mental make-up were perfectly astounding and every nail was hit shrewdly on the head. I was impatient, impulsive, reckless to the point of lunacy, obstinate, self-opinionated, and indeed, all those things which you have gathered about me from this book. So incredibly apt were they that I knew it must be a put-up job, but my friends, who had all roared with laughter at the revelations, swore that they had revealed nothing. And all that was left for me to do was to laugh with them.

Now at Christmas-time I was accustomed to chaff my mother about the exceedingly unpleasant surprise my arrival had

given her. The Christmas following the receipt of that horoscope I repeated that now time-honoured joke and happened to add that it must have been rather nice in a way to have been having a baby with the sound of the Carol Singers still in her ears.

‘But there weren’t any carol singers,’ she said.

I stared. ‘But you always told me that I was born at two o’clock in the morning?’

‘Oh, no, my dear,’ she said. ‘You were born at two o’clock in the afternoon.’

‘Are you sure?’ I said.

‘Of course I’m sure,’ she said. ‘Who else could be so sure?’ Then she sighed. ‘Wasn’t I the only one in the house that didn’t have a Christmas dinner?’

And that is all. There is no moral and no underlining, though I feel constrained to add just this. When I began to write this book there were things in which I failed to discern a significance. But now I see that I have been writing about The Four Freedoms, Security from Want, the Beveridge Report, the 1943 Education Bill, the future of Public Schools, the impoverishment of the land and the future of Agriculture.

Those are the very things that are now in the public mind and am I wrong to insist that they were also in ours?

But those things belong to a brave new world that will somehow leave me far behind. For when to-day I hear the sound of a horse and cart I do not go to my window to identify the driver. I think of Grey Jack or the roan mare or of Wyatt and his sulky. When I see a harvest field I think of Fourses and of Long Harry and his monstrous pitching fork. And so it goes on. Even the cob nuts in my garden lack the taste of those I found long ago at Moat Farm and my violets lack that clear sweet scent of Spring that was in those which we gathered in Fish Pond Wood. And all that, as you realize, is folly of the worst, and yet I do not know. . .

Nor is there an Epilogue, though I may tell you that all the old worthies of whom I have spoken are dead and gone and if any by chance be living still, then they must be of a great age indeed. St. Valentine’s has gone, and largesse and the lords of the harvest. To be an Oddfellow or Forester is to send a stamped insurance card to a particular office, and a hobmedod is a snail. In the village now there is never a

Finch or a Pardon, a Kerridge, a Home, an Addis or a Balfour. Even the fields where I measured the stacks with Wyatt and the thatcher are no longer under cultivation and on them are plantations of young fir.

It is of *happy* Autumn fields that the poet speaks when thinking of his own days that were no more, and even in that I can have no choice but to be a pessimist. But though much has gone, a something still remains. Browning may be right after all and the best may be yet to be. And if not, it will still be good, in memory at least, to travel other roads, and there will always be a track across a heath and the ancient turf of the Peddars' Way.

